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VAL of PARADISE

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VAL HANNON DRIFTED DOWN ACROSS THE BUNCH-GRASS LEVELS ON THE GREAT RED KING *Page* 31

VAL OF PARADISE

BY

VINGIE E. ROE

AUTHOR OF

THARON OF LOST VALLEY, ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	JOHN HANNON'S FIRMAMENT	1
II	HIGH PLAY	9
III	THE FRIENDS OF PARADISE	27
IV	THE CROSS IN THE WILDERNESS	35
V	"WHY DON'T YOU RUN REDSTAR?"	48
VI	THE CRY OF A DESERT OWL	58
VII	THE FOURTH AT SANTA LEANDRA	71
VIII	A RUSTLER'S HAND	85
IX	THE LIGHT OF DAWNING FIRES	102
X	VAL CALLS	114
XI	THE LURE OF THE PADRE'S GARDEN	127
XII	THE CRY IN THE BLIND TRAIL HILLS	144
XIII	DEEP WATERS	147
XIV	THE STIRRING TALK	158
XV	ON THE RIM OF MESA GRANDE	168
XVI	THE VIXEN'S HEART	183
XVII	BRISTON DOES SOME THINKING	190
XVIII	THE FACE IN THE DOORWAY	199
XIX	THE BLACK RUSTLER RIDES	210
XX	GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN	220
XXI	HOME TO THE FIELDS OF PARADISE	230

VAL OF PARADISE

VAL OF PARADISE

CHAPTER I

JOHN HANNON'S FIRMAMENT

PARADISE! What words shall one choose to tell of it and those who made it—of its beauty, its strength and its arrogance?

In a land where distance hazed the southern skyline, where tawny buttes and *mesas* stood majestically against the blue, where bunch-grass levels swept toward the illimitable west and the Blind Trail Hills rose stark and forbidding upon the east, it lay like the heart of peace itself, smiling in the sun, green with its wide alfalfa fields beneath its living waters. Tall cottonwoods weaved and whispered in the little winds that blew always from the south and a high-topped palm or two stood like sentinels to guard its gates. Where Bluewater, the great sweet spring that boiled eternally in its stone-flagged *patio,* ran out beneath the trees, there purple iris grew beside the trickle, and water hyacinth.

Worn, old-fashioned chairs and benches stood hospitably on the clean-swept earth where the poplars made their shaking shade, and hammocks, gay with fringe, swung in the little breezes.

And, half circling this enchanting spot upon the left, there stood the ranch-house itself.

How far back none knew, its adobe blocks had been set one upon another to form its monstrous walls. All traces of their distinction had been long since lost, smoothed and blended by the erosion of the elements.

The house was irregular, full of great rooms and passage-ways and sudden turnings, of mysterious and unexpected nooks and corners. In the centre of the half-circle which it formed around the spring and the cottonwoods, two great doors opened inward, taking the stranger abruptly into a room so huge—so high, so wide, so deep—that he invariably caught his breath, and if he were a man of parts with sensibilities, he stood in amaze before its beauties.

Its hard earth floor was covered to every corner with Indian rugs in staring black-and-white, every one of which in its beautiful design, its size, its thickness, was worth a pocket full of gold. On its walls yet other rugs and blankets were stretched between the long, deep rifts that answered for windows, but these were bright with colour—flaming reds and golds and the sharp clear contrast of the blacks that only the Indian weavers know so well how to use. Here and there among these striking panels there hung a picture or two—and again the stranger stared, for one was the Mona Lisa with her ever entrancing smile, and one was Psyche at Spring in the exquisite lights and tints of April,

while yet one other was that undying joy to those who love horseflesh, Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair, full four feet long.

In the space and distances of this great room were all the things that make for human comfort and content. Tables with covers of wonderful hand-work stood here and there with books upon them, and lamps, while worn chairs with deep cushions invited everywhere.

There were couches against the walls, and in one corner where the light fell softly from the west through the fine-leaved vine outside the window, a piano, so old that its once milk-white keys were yellow as an old dog's tooth, lifted its harp-shaped top majestically against the piece of ancient tapestry that draped the wall behind. A narrow bench, entirely covered with minute carvings, black with age and polished by the wear of many a whispering gown, stood meekly before it, as if glad to serve in its lowly way the once grand instrument.

Here in the dusk a woman came sometimes, feeling with outstretched hands for the things she could not see, and sliding softly on the ancient bench, played tinkling tunes of a long past day. A sweet, fair woman she was, frail and delicate of outline and demeanour, with patient lines in her clear face and with the light of a splendid soul shining in her darkness.

For twenty years she had been like a prisoner in this fortress, but guarded by so many loving hearts, watched by so many keen eyes, served by so many

eager hands, that she was in reality a queen. And here, often, when she played her nameless tunes a man came to find her, to sit and listen and to watch her face with such a heart-ache on his features that Tragedy stalked through the shadowed room.

This was John Hannon, the boss of the *rancho,* the greatest one-man power in the country of the *mesas,* hated by his far neighbours for his fences and his fields, and his methods, feared by his enemies, and a shining mark for that sharp gentry of the Border whose raids and crimes were a load on the hearts of all the ranchers within striking distance of the line. And the slim blind woman was his wife, Belle, the only woman-creature he had ever loved in his life save one, and whose affliction had darkened the windows of his soul with bitter rebellion.

Branching from this central room a labyrinth of rooms stretched to right and left, the dining-room toward the north, flanked by the kitchen and storerooms, the many smaller rooms occupied by the Mexican and Indian women who did all the work of the big house. To the left and front circled the private apartments of the boss and his family.

Out behind, toward the north, there lay the great barns and corrals, the sheds and stacks and paddocks that bespoke huge herds.

John Hannon's land stretched for many a mile, according to his strength to hold it, and cattle grazed on the sweet bunch grass as far as the eye

could see. Four living springs among the *mesas,* more precious than gold in that half desert land, were his by right of long possession and might of protection. His cattle drank from their crystal flow and all others were jealously kept away. Not that many strays found their way so far across his ranges, for neighbours were scattered sparsely in the wide country.

Cowboys, *vaqueros,* slept in the long bunk-house that stood to the right of the ranch-house and the barns, followed the rattling chuck-wagons, rode the range and were John Hannon's to a man, for this big, heavy *ranchero* was of a personality that drew men to him strongly, or repelled them as strongly. Those who came to work for him and felt the latter side of him, soon departed, for he was keen as a hawk and knew his own immediately. His hand was open to his friends, closed and heavy to his enemies. To that which opposed him he was iron, steel, cold and hard as granite. His dark eyes were changeable, soft as shadows when he looked upon his wife, keen and bright as flame when his swift anger was aroused.

And that was not so rare a thing, this rousing of his wrath, for there were those who resented his broad fields of alfalfa that ran toward the south, who called him a "nester," that title of opprobrium—the cattlemen, who looked with suspicion and desire upon the pride of John Hannon's heart, namely the wondrous horses that ran inside his fences.

Ah! Those horses! How shall one describe them?

They were red as heart's blood and every whit as vital. In every shade, from the pale flame-red of the young matched racers, Firebrand and The Flame, with their cream-white manes and tails, through the darker blood-bay tones of old Hotfoot, their mother, of Redcloud, of Dawnlight the wild young mare with her evil heart, of Lightning the beautiful, they ranged to the deep and splendid colour of Redstar, the king.

If the others were amazing in their beauty and perfection, Redstar was beyond comparison. And he was not kin to the Red Brood, since he was an alien, brought from none knew what distant land save John Hannon himself who had ridden him home one day in spring some four years back, after a long and silent absence.

But though there were many red horses on the bunch-grass levels then, though the stranger was worn and lean with long, quick travel, though dust and sweat were caked upon him and his eyes were hollow with fatigue, yet from that first moment of his appearance in the wide ranch yard, he was the king.

Ah, yes, he was the king. And he had always been; for beside his regal beauty, the heart of a king beat in his broad breast, a kingly spirit looked out of his deep, intelligent eyes, and the speed of nothing less than an equine king was in his long straight legs.

The boss had swung stiffly from him that spring twilight and laid upon his neck a hand that was eloquent of pride.

"Give him th' best th' ranch's got," he said to Briston the foreman, "now an' always."

"Where on earth d'you get him?" asked the other wonderingly, but the rancher turned wearily away toward the comfort of his house.

"So fur from here that you wouldn't know, Tom," he said, "and," he added as an afterthought, "his price has left me nearly busted."

So Redstar came to Paradise, and it was Paradise to him in all truth, for he had the run of all the fresh green fields, the open stretches where the bunch grass grew when the riders were about, a private paddock all his own, and none but the master ever backed him, until—until Val Hannon grew up sufficiently to look her daddy in the eye with her two velvet orbs and demand the king to ride.

And Val Hannon ranked above the horses if such a thing were possible—perhaps because her mother loved her with an idolatry that lit up her darkness. If Belle Hannon had loved an Apache Indian he would have been precious to her husband for that reason.

But there was reason in plenty for the boss to rank his daughter first, all the reason a man might heed wrapped in the slim young form of her, for if the Red Brood strained comparison, Val Hannon beggared it.

When she came in from the open levels and tossed

her hat toward the nearest corner, her kerchief after it, she was a sight to dwarf the beauty of all Paradise and its possessions, for she was beauty incarnate, the heart and soul and pulse of it. She was tall and strong and slender, straight as a lance in rest and pliant as a willow. Her face was oval, with a well-set chin above her pretty throat, and the sunsets of the *mesas* shone through her soft dark skin. Her hair was black and running with loose waves, like a gentle sea in the sun, and her eyes were like her father's, dark and swiftly changeable. They were long eyes, slumbrous at times and full of tenderness for every living creature, but they could widen and flash upon occasion.

She was born to the open as the winds to the levels, the white clouds to the sky. Hour by hour she rode in the great spaces of the plains, drowsed beneath the shadow of some weathered shaft of the red stone of the region, and dreamed the dreams of girlhood.

And Val on Redstar was the prize, the crown of Paradise, the imperial sovereign before whom the whole ranch bowed in adoration—but the sweetest, kindest, simplest ruler that ever sat a throne.

CHAPTER II

HIGH PLAY

ON a warm sweet day in early summer the town of Santa Leandra drowsed beneath its trees, half asleep and utterly at peace.

Hardly a breath of breeze stirred the huge elms and the cottonwoods which shaded its one street and the crooked, pretty lanes and byways that held its ancient houses. Adobe for the most part, these old structures might hold a thousand secrets with their nameless passage-ways, their dusky rooms, their seclusion.

A stream of living water, known for three hundred miles each way, trickled sluggishly beside the straggling street, and to the south and west stretched out the country of the *mesas*. To the east and north, flanking all the land indeed, there rose and circled the illimitable mystery of the Blind Trail Hills.

Gardens flourished and flowers grew in profusion, and children shouted and played in the shady ways.

Santa Leandra was an ancient dame among towns. Three generations back she had sent out her wagons with their freight of gold, brought them back laden with supplies for the two stores. Today the wagons still creaked over the many miles of

bunch-grass plain that lay between her and the railroad—the railroad that would never come nearer—and they still carried a slender freight of gold, still brought back supplies. For Santa Leandra, though seemingly of the past, was very much of the present.

On this particular day the life of the one street was gathered at the rack before Hunnewell's store where a bunch of horses were tied. They were good horses, all—lean, hard-ridden chaps, but in the pink of fitness, and most of them belonged in the place. The men who lived in this wild land were more than half horse, and wherever one was, there would his mount be also.

For a game was running at Hunnewell's and had run since the night before. One of those horses at the rack belonged to Brideman who rode alone, and when he struck town there was always play worth while at Hunnewell's. Brideman carried gold always, and though that was no rare thing, it was forever worth the taking.

But it took a good one to take it from Brideman in all truth—usually Corey who lived in the big stone house at the north end of the street, or Sanchez who came in from the outskirts.

Both of these were at the table now, along with Tait and Hunnewell himself and several cowboys in chaps and sombreros, with their six-shooters hanging low at their lean hips. For that matter every man in the place carried a gun, after the custom of the region. Tait, there, was known in a

modest way for his clever trigger finger, and Corey had killed more than one man in the long life that had silvered his thick hair and given him the saintly look of a Daniel. But Corey could play, and it was worth a man's time to watch his benignant face when he held three aces and a pair of queens and never a shadow flecked across it. Also it was of the same mild impassiveness when he bluffed out the pot on deuces. But Brideman, big, bearded, blond and full of laughter, was in high fettle this day and was cleaning up on all of them. He had played for sixteen hours straight on end and was fresh as at the beginning, keen as a racer. His blue eyes, set under their beetling brows, were sparkling like harbour lights, and he struck the dirty, canvas-covered table with a mighty fist from time to time as he raked in the gold before him.

At Hunnewell's store the bar, as being of first import, came first on the left as one entered the place. Beyond there ran the counter over which the wives of Santa Leandra bought their flour and sugar, their calico and ginghams by the yard. To the right there stood several tables like the one at which the men were playing, for sometimes the town was packed full of strange horses and gratifying crowds played at Hunnewell's.

Today, as the men steadily lost to Brideman, a shadow darkened the door and a girl stood there. She leaned gracefully against the lintel and smiled, her little head tilted sidewise like a bird's, her black eyes roving over every face there with a bold bright

glance. She was clad in gay garments of scarlet and black, with a sash of striped silk that hung to her knee at the left, after it had most saucily bound her slender waist in a wide, tight girdle. These were her best clothes, daringly donned because there were strange men in town, and she went boldly to the store for a bagatelle of some sort or other.

At the sound of her light foot at the sill the players looked up—Brideman with a leer and a laugh and a pointed compliment, the cowboys with that lively interest which all their ilk feel in womenkind, but Paul Sanchez with a black scowl, for she was his daughter.

"Lolo," he said sharply, "go home—*pronto.*"

But she only leaned more comfortably against the doorpost and smiled at the men.

"Lolo likes company," said Brideman, boisterously, "and why shouldn't she, shut in this forsaken town? Tell me that. Come watch us play, little one," he added, turning his great face toward the door.

But Sanchez was on his feet, his dark face flaming. He lifted an imperious finger and pointed north, and the girl, with a last sidewise glance and a pout, slipped gracefully off the step and disappeared.

Sanchez sat down again, picked up his cards and called for a draw coolly, but there was fire in his black eyes. That invitation of the big man to the girl to "come and watch the play" given directly

against his command had roused him to the depths. Like all his race the Mexican was of quick angers and resentments.

And now, as if he lost command of his usually sane judgment, he lost the last of his gold and rose with a bow, his cards thrown on the table.

"Your pleasure, gentlemen," he said. "Drink with me, if Hunnewell will trust me."

Hunnewell behind his worn old bar trusted any one. Moreover he knew that Sanchez was only temporarily broke. So the players left the table with much noise of scraping chairs and jingling spurs and lined up for the fiery refreshment which would have floored a stranger.

And Lolo, swinging down the little street beneath the elms and cottonwoods, her slim brown hands on her narrow hips, her black head high with offended dignity, stopped short to stare with wide eyes to where the open road led in from the sage-brush plain.

A great dust was on the level, for many horses ran there, fleet horses, she knew, for they poked their dark noses ahead of the dust, even though the wind, blowing with a keen freshness, was behind them. The girl lifted her hands instinctively and set the bunch of scarlet flowers more jauntily behind her little ear, smoothed the black hair that lay like shining satin above her beautiful brow. Lolo Sanchez was lovely to look upon and knew it perfectly.

More men were coming into Santa Leandra—more excitement, more play at Hunnewell's, more

drinking, and, incidentally, more masculine eyes to behold her in her finery.

"Little hussy," called a woman from a doorway, her brood of babies at her skirts, "stand an' watch! Bold—bold—an' don't care a rap!"

Lolo whirled upon her like a fury, black eyes suddenly flaming.

"Hold your tongue, you Marta Winne," she said, "if I had your hair and teeth I'd hide behind modesty, too."

The woman, flushing, flung indoors and drew her flock after. The shot had gone home truly, for the wisp of hair wound to a tight knob the size of an egg on her round pate was pale straw colour, and she was painfully snaggle-toothed.

Lolo turned back to watch the oncoming cloud of dust with its potentialities. It came with an increasing sound of thunder, with the rattle and creak of chain and saddle, and presently a band of men rode into the end of the sleepy street and pounded down its length toward Hunnewell's.

They were lean brown chaps to a man, they rode like centaurs, and every man-jack of them carried two guns swinging at his hips. Their garments were good and showed a certain vanity of adornment, such as an ostentation of spotted belts and riding cuffs. But the thing about them that took the eye of every beholder in that land was their horses.

Grand horses they were, wild, ramping, mettlesome creatures all big, all hard as nails from long

and strenuous use, and the one that raced ahead was more beautiful than all of them.

And if the horse shone up in sharp contrast among those behind him, not less did his rider also.

This was a young man, not over seven and twenty, tall, lean as a hound, the broad shoulders beneath his flannel shirt slipping with muscle, the long hands on his pommel slender as a woman's and as fine-grained, his handsome blue eyes in odd contrast to the darkness of his hair and the smooth dark tan of his cheeks.

There were bad faces in that bunch behind him, hard faces and sinister ones, but this man's face was the epitome of joyous recklessness. As he thundered down the street of Santa Leandra with his men behind him, he took off his hat and rode bareheaded and smiling, his keen eyes seeing everything in sight, even the half-hidden old door beneath a lattice, the hound pup that scratched frantically to get under a sill, and the fact that every house had huge, crude locks, as if the inmates trusted neither neighbour nor friend. Neither did he fail to see the girl, standing wide-eyed in her finery beside the way as he pounded down to stop with a rattle and slide before the rack at Hunnewell's.

"Too many horses, boys," he said in a voice as rich as a harp, "tie over there," and he drew his mount aside. This horse was not like the rest. Every line in him bespoke an alien breed, a better blood. It looked out of his quick, intelligent eyes, stood forth in the delicacy of his nostrils, the small-

ness of his sharp ears, the height and shape of his withers, the length and strength of his slim legs.

The man tied him securely, but with a sliding knot whose loose end, responsive to a jerk, would loose the whole. As the master turned to leave, the beautiful creature, drawing a long breath, leaned affectionately toward him and rubbed its cheek against his arm.

The group of newcomers, falling in close together as if from habit, crossed the street to the store, mounted the steps with a clatter of spurs and entered. The leader stood first inside the door and looked around with the sparkling smile that lighted his face as with an inner flame. The men at the table looked up, and though they knew perfectly well, had known for ten minutes, of their arrival, they showed no surprise. Every face there was placid, shallow with an alert indifference. Brideman alone looked keenly over the crowd with an appraising glance.

"Hello, boys," said the tall young chap, setting the broad black hat back upon his head at an angle, "room for some more?"

"Always room for more," said the genial Hunnewell, "what'll you have?"

"Molten hell for these," said the other airily with a wave of his slim hand toward those behind him, "water for me. Gentlemen," he included the players at the table, who began to rise at the time-honoured invitation.

"Wh—what did you say, stranger?" asked Hun-

newell, a grin beginning to spread on his florid face.

But the young man turned and looked at him, and all the smile, all the sparkle, was gone suddenly from his face.

"I said 'water', Hunnewell," he said evenly, "just plain, cold, ordinary water. Suits my particular type of beauty better. Keeps my complection smooth."

"Sure," said Hunnewell gracefully and gravely, "I agree with you. 'Ain't nothin' better," and he deftly served up the drinks and lazily wiped the worn old bar where a thousand passing elbows had left their mark in polish.

"Play?" asked Hunnewell.

"If we may."

There was a smoothness of tongue, a precision of speech about this dusty rider of the bunch grass, that struck the listeners and though they could not have defined it, it set the man somewhat apart. He seemed different from all in that big bare room when he drew up and sat in the game which their coming had disrupted.

Hunnewell bustled about and drew forth a second table, round, of goodly size, canvas covered, a third to match it, and soon there was the slap of cards, the occasional word, the sound of silver, the dull clink of soft raw gold to break the silence of the game.

Sanchez, out of it, drew up a chair and sat smoking and watching as if he had not but now lost the

last motley bag of dust, dollars and *pesos* he possessed in the world. A game was a game and he was a born gambler, feeling its lure vicariously.

At the table where Brideman played the stranger had taken seat naturally, as if one strong force drew another. As the cut for deal went round these two men looked at each other and a keen observer would have sensed a measuring, an appraising, as if each tested the other's mettle. Corey had joined the second table and Hunnewell the third, while the rest of the original players were about evenly distributed.

The day was still young, and interest leaped up anew in their faces. Some of these had dropped out, slept an hour or two and come back to face Brideman again, but Brideman had not slept. Now his blue eyes under their shaggy brows shone with a keener brilliance. He sensed something more to his liking, a worthier foe than these whom he knew so well. The piles of silver coins and gold dust before him were insulting in their size, a plain statement of inferior conflict, though neither Tait nor Corey nor Sanchez need take a back seat anywhere on that Border.

Brideman was rich for the day. Whether or not he would be tomorrow was another matter. However, he had but to ride away into the distances which swallowed and disgorged him at fitful times, to come back again laden to his ears with gold.

And many odd things this man had put up at times when luck went against him—once a wonder-

ful ring of heavy carven gold which, upon pressure, shot forth a minute blade.

Brideman had said the steel was poisoned and the gamblers had laughed. Whereupon he had leaned suddenly and touched the cat stretched among the barrels in the warmth of the fire, for it was winter time. The thing was effective, for the creature died promptly and with scarce a quiver.

Sanchez had won the ring, but Brideman had forced him to continue the play for twenty hours, until he won it back.

Again, he had staked the beautiful ivory hand of a sacred statue, got from none knew what sacked Mission of the Border, silent sign of the man's depravity. Sanchez had won that, too, and, play as he would, Brideman had never been able to win it back.

So now today he measured his new ground and gathered the motley wealth before him into compact piles.

But Hunnewell's was due that day to see such high play as it had not seen for years, and it was due to see the breaking of Brideman, a thing which it had never seen.

For it was not long before every man at the table —and at the one adjoining, through subtle glances and keenly cocked ears—knew that Brideman had met his match, his real match, not a spurting victor who won and lost again, such as Corey and Sanchez, but a man who played to him steadily and began to win.

At first it was with huge delight and mounting merriment that he shoved over this and that small heap of gold and silver. He roared in his great voice and struck the table with his hairy fists and constantly delayed the game to call for drinks, which Hunnewell must stop to serve.

"Playin' to Brideman! By jinks! A kid like you!" he said, "an' winnin'! Ain't it amazin'! Come on, young-un. I played when you was on your mammy's lap—come agin!" and he shook his leonine head and refused to draw, holding his hand cupped in his broad palm and grinning across at the stranger.

"Old methods, Brideman," said the other, smiling, "we young ones sometimes teach you old dogs new tricks. I raise you."

"Darn!" said Brideman, who was notoriously mild in his speech among a hard-swearing gentry, as he lost again.

So the day drifted by with sweet winds in from the plain and a high sun that sailed in a cloudless sky, and the stacks of coin before Brideman dwindled, to grow at the stranger's elbow.

"Maybe you're tired," said the young man once, halting a moment, "would you like to rest and begin again later?"

"Quit? Brideman a quitter? *Deal them cards!*"

And for once the laughter had subsided in the giant's throat. His sparkling blue eyes were still bright, but red rims had come about them as he was showing his liquor and his strain.

The play at the other tables had dwindled as interest grew in the big game, and finally ceased altogether as the men rose and stood round in a circle, watching this cool blue-eyed stranger pare Brideman down with steady persistency.

Sanchez and Corey and Tait leaned near in breathless intensity and from time to time some one drew a long breath, for none among them had ever seen the bully beaten down to his limit so, seen him recognize a master hand as he plainly did now by the grimness of his face, the lack of his eternal laughter. It was the first time they had ever known him to play in silence.

At one o'clock Brideman pushed over with a wavering hand the last motley heap of gold before him and called for two cards. He had scarcely moved from his chair for twenty-two hours. This was the last deal and it seemed impossible that the run of luck could or would change, and those in the circle drew in closer. So interested were they that none had seen Lolo Sanchez as she stood for a long time in the door, watching the face of the man opposite Brideman, whose back was toward her.

The girl was a flower, a light in the shadow, a laugh in the windy sun, enough to make a man forget many things—had made more than one forget the things he should have remembered. But she was a wanton, a thief of love and a little pirate, taking all and giving little—a laugh, a kiss, a promise, and gone like thistle floss upon the wind. Many had tried to hold her and failed.

Her father watched her with deep anger and considered her a danger and a liability.

But Lolo was brave, whatever else she was, and played her tricks under his eyes without fear. Now, as she watched the lean, dark face of the stranger with its big blue eyes her own were deep and wide with a new expression—a look of wonder, of newness, of keen intensity.

She scanned its every feature, the tumbled dark hair above the white brow where the sweatband left its mark, the straight nose, the heavy eyebrows and lashes that so strangely shadowed the light of the eyes, the handsome mouth with the dimples at the up-turned corners. She brazenly looked over the lean, strong figure from the broad shoulders down to the slender waist, and found the man good in all the slim glory of his youth and his prime.

And as this man called Brideman for the last time and it came to the show-down, while the giant threw his cards upon the cloth with a muttered oath and made as if to push back from the table, the girl pushed hurriedly through the crowding men and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Broke, Brideman?" she asked softly.

Brideman looked up with his red-rimmed eyes that were full of rage.

"What's it to you?" he asked brutally.

"Nothing," said Lolo, smiling, "only—if you want another try you can have it."

"Yes?" he sneered, "what'll I stake? I'm cleaned."

And he made to rise, stiffly, waveringly, tired suddenly to the point of breaking.

But Lolo pushed him down with her little hand.

"Stake me," she said, "I give you leave."

Brideman stared for a moment in dull amaze.

Then his great laugh boomed in the room once more, the sparkle came swiftly back to his blue eyes.

"Done!" he cried, "come on, young-un, if you're a stayer! I stake Lolo, th' Rose o' Santa Leandra, against your whole pile!"

And he waved a steadied hand grandiloquently toward the stacks of gold and silver.

For the first time the stranger raised his eyes and looked at the girl, but she did not meet his gaze.

Sanchez forged forward and caught his daughter roughly by the shoulder, but she put her hands on her slim hips and shook him off disdainfully.

"I'm nineteen," she said, "go on, Brideman."

Sanchez flung up his hand, snapped his fingers. His brown face was ashen grey.

"Damn!" he said savagely, "you hussy! Yes, go on, Brideman, and I hope to God you lose her!"

For a second or so the stranger hesitated, scanned the faces of the principals in the little play. Then he smiled, picked up the cards, deftly shook them together and shoved them over.

"All right," he said, "and you may have the deal in the bargain. One hand to draw."

Brideman, steady as a rock, dealt, laid down the pack and picked up his hand.

He discarded two, picked up the pack again and looked at the other. The young man threw down four cards and smiled.

The girl by the table flushed like a sunset. A slight chance he took to win her, in all truth!

In silence Brideman dealt him four cards, took his own two, and in silence they both spread down their hands, face up.

Brideman held two queens and a jack, a five and a trey.

The stranger held four kings straight, and a nine spot—the card he had held from his discard. Lolo, watching, saw this card turn up and the flush deepened in her dark cheeks.

With an oath Brideman bungled up from the table.

"Devil's luck!" he said hoarsely, "but you're sold, Lolo, body an' soul!"—with which word and a mocking laugh he lurched to the bar.

And Lolo, looking up with her wide black eyes and her pomegranate lips parted like moist rosebuds, smiled at her master like a siren.

The man looked down at her and the smile died on his own face. For a long moment he regarded her, gravely.

Then he stepped to her side and took her hand.

"Little, bold, pretty thing," he said, "don't do these tricks any more. Here, hold your sash."

And he caught the broad end of the striped vanity that swung at her knee, spread it, gathered its

end tight, closed her hands about the knot, and, turning to the table, swept into the sack thus formed the load of gold and silver thereupon.

Then he stooped and kissed her lightly upon the rosebud of her mouth.

"Go home with your dad," he said, "and be a good girl."

Then he gathered his men with his quick glance, walked to the door and out into the afternoon sunshine.

In ten seconds the whole bunch after dashing, rattling, and scrambling among the horses, had mounted and turned and were making out of town toward the south with the great red horse five jumps ahead, his satin hide shining, his huge neck bowed, the cloud of his black mane like smoke above him and his long tail a fan behind.

Every man at Hunnewell's but one crowded out upon the porch to watch their going.

"Boys," said Hunnewell, solemnly, "do you know who that was?"

"No," came the answer promptly, from several, "but we got a good guess."

"Right, I take it," said Hunnewell, "That's Velantrie from th' Border, and his band o' bandits—Don Keeota Velantrie, they call him, south, though why—for that name, I don't know, an' he's th' smoothest lad in th' world, they say. I saw him once before, in a little town over th' line, an' he remembered me. They say he knows a lot that some folks don't—your name, too, Brideman."

But Brideman lay across the table inside, dead asleep.

"Velantrie!" whispered Lolo Sanchez, her small body bending gracefully under her weight of wealth, her soft mouth moist with that careless kiss, "Velantrie of the Border! Santa Maria—it was high play today!"

CHAPTER III

THE FRIENDS OF PARADISE

THE summer was glorious upon the land. The sun was high in a cloudless sky and a little wind came eternally in from the bunch-grass levels. The scattered *mesas* stood majestically in the blue haze, tawny and imposing. Here and there a weathered finger of stone cut up against the sky stark as a skeleton.

Under the light the wide alfalfa fields, of which John Hannon was inordinately proud and which the ranchmen hated, lay like spread emerald toward the south. Scattered against this vivid green the Red Brood grazed in opulent plenty.

Redcloud the big and savage stallion, Hotfoot, old but built like a racer and with the look of a colt, Dawnlight the evil one, Firebrand and The Flame, they were a sight for gods and men in their perfection. They ate of the sweet forage with daintiness, raised their beautiful heads from time to time to look over their world, and called their shrill challenges to all and sundry beneath the high blue sky.

Only Redstar across the fence in a separate field grazed in quietness, unmindful of the ramping creatures that came and raced along the fence with lifted tails and snorting nostrils.

He had no need of bluster, of wildness.

Little he cared for the Red Brood's challenge.

He was the king and his behaviour was fitting his royalty.

The hatred of one stallion for another was in Redcloud's scream of anger when he passed, but he had never been known to answer it. It was as if he felt a mighty contempt for the wild red horse, a bit smaller than himself, not so dark in colour, heavier and of less speed.

"Redcloud hates th' king," said John Hannon, smiling, "but Redstar don't know he's on earth. It's th' heart o' th' thoroughbred in him, th' instinctive knowledge that they ain't rivals—can't be nohow."

But Lightning, the beautiful gelding, slim, graceful, tall and swift, gentler than all the rest, was of a nearer mettle. If there was one horse on the ranch that could hold a candle to Redstar, it was this dark bay beauty with his mane like a lady's tresses and his gentle eyes.

But Redstar's eyes were gentler, his soft coat darker with a faint black shadow drifting through it along shoulder and hip where the dim black dapples shone, his regal head higher, his nostrils smaller, more delicate, his slim legs longer, his massive withers higher.

When Val Hannon looked at Redstar a mist of tears sometimes dimmed her eyes, a lump rose in her throat.

"It doesn't seem possible that a horse could be so

grand, so—so human," she said once, "he's more than a horse in all truth. There's a spirit in him that's like a soul."

And she was right, for when she came to the upper bars and cupping her hands to her scarlet mouth sent out the double whistle that was between them only, it was more than a horse who raised his splendid head—alert enough now—lifted his flowing tail a trifle, arched his high neck and sailed away across the fields toward her—it was a friend.

Nay, more—it was a lover.

A lover who smelled of her hair with long inhalations, as if he drew the beloved scent of her into his lungs, who rested his great muzzle on her shoulder, rubbed his cheek on hers—red satin on tawny velvet—who nibbled her hands with his soft lips and searched her garments for tidbits.

He stood like a rock while she flung her saddle on him, cinched it carefully and mounted—but then Dame Nature opened her hand and poured upon him the speed of her swift things—the hill streams rushing, the winds across the plains, the fires that sweep through grass.

When Redstar swept out from the wide ranch yard and sailed away down across the levels with Val in the saddle, her father sometimes stood and watched them with such a look of pride as a king might wear beholding his domain from the mountain tops.

"By all that's wonderful, Tom," he said once softly, striking a fist in his open palm, "there isn't

a pair like them in this world! Do you know what that horse can do? He's eight years old an' he was once——" But there he checked his impulsive speech and his steady eyes flickered a bit upon the distant two, and Tom Briston did not know what it was that Redstar could do, or had been.

And Val, loose in the saddle as an Indian, shot through the soft blue atmosphere like a bolt, her dark eyes half closed, her lips apart, a smile dimpling in her cheeks, drunk to the heart on the glorious speed, the keen singing of the wind in her ears, the humming thunder of Redstar's shining hoofs.

Redstar himself was no less drunken with his own perfection. He had run always—always, since those dim days which he had nearly forgotten—and the open sage was to him an amphitheatre. There was nothing in all the blue distance to stop him.

There was nothing in the land to catch him—had never been. He had run with Redcloud, and with the slim young racers Firebrand and The Flame, and with Lightning, but always he had run away from them. Dawnlight had screamed and fought her bit, and raged like a fury because she fell behind, had stopped and plunged and acted like a maniac, and John Hannon had never let her run again.

Only Lightning, of all the speedy crew, had hung on Redstar's flank for any length of time, and the master had looked at him with new interest.

"There's somethin' by-ordinary in this Lightnin'

horse, Tom," he had said, "for th' Redstar's a high gauge to judge by—a damn high gauge!"

On that soft warm day when Lolo Sanchez carried her gold down through the gaping street of Santa Leandra and did not see the gazers for her dreaming, Val Hannon drifted down across the bunch-grass levels on the great red king and smiled in the joy of freedom, the splendour of her youth and the glory of the open spaces.

She went by Crystal Flow, moving gently above its sands, shaded by the poplar tree that grew beside it, a sentinel to be seen afar, and lay on her face to drink, Redstar's velvet nose a foot from her cheek. She sat for a while in the scant and fitful shadow of the poplar and looked far to the south and west, her dark eyes hawk-keen. Redstar, too, searched the wide-spread land and found in it nothing alien, only the cattle grazing in scattered herds, an occasional rider and his horse dark dots among them, a buzzard or two sailing high in the blue vault.

So presently they left the Crystal Flow and swung far and away toward the north and west, to skirt the foot of the Mesa Grande that lifted its flat top high above the surrounding levels, to find the narrow trail that went up its south side in steep and dangerous slants, and to climb to its high tableland where the ancient Indian huts stood, hollow and deserted, whipped by the winds and eaten by their sands.

These silent places held a lure for Val Han-

non, had always drawn her from the time when, a little child, her father had first brought her here to scan the world below. They stood as they had stood for uncounted years, their blank walls broken only by the small apertures that let in the light high up along their sides, their clumsy ladders leading to their flat roofs, their dark and dismal rooms peopled only by the ghosts of the departed race that made them. The places of their fires were still extant, signs of cunning craft still lingered in the scant utensils that littered some of them, the pictures cut in the crumbling walls.

An impregnable stronghold had once been this Mesa Grande, keeping safe its timid people. There had been no trail up its weathered sides in the days when they prayed to the sun-god from its top, only such a secret way that two men might keep down an army. The trail had come with the white man whose curiosity had conquered the precipice.

So Val rode about the table-land this day and looked down on all the plains about, scanned the forbidding range of the Blind Trail Hills that frowned against the east, and sauntered slowly through the silent group of huts. Presently, as the sun went down the west and the desert twilight began to sift its wondrous colours through the golden haze, she rode out to the edge of the *mesa* that faced the west and sat searching the world below.

Redstar, too, looked keenly all around with his bright dark eyes, his great head high in the air, his long mane flowing gently down the arch of his neck.

Val sat straight in her saddle, her hands folded on the pommel.

And as they rested so in the hush of the eternal silence alone on the *mesa* with its ghosts of a vanished people, something moved on the plain below, far off to the west, and caught their searching gaze.

A band of horsemen rode there, swiftly, sweeping out of the north where lay the town of Santa Leandra, and one shot out ahead, a leader.

The girl shaded her eyes with her hand and watched this rider and his horse. A red horse it was—a great red horse whose mane lifted above him like a cloud, whose beautiful body lay stretched along the earth in skimming flight, whose whole make and seeming were oddly familiar.

For a long moment she watched, while her eyes grew round with wonder and her lips fell apart. Then she dropped her hand and laid it on Redstar's neck as if she made sure of his living presence.

"Sweetheart," she said at last, incredulously, "if you weren't here beneath me I'd swear you ran yonder, as sure as death!"

And far off there where he rode like the wind itself toward the mystery of the all-engulfing Border, Velantrie rose in his stirrups and scanned the solitary horse and rider, standing like a statue high on the *mesa's* edge.

He was too far away to see the wondrous beauty of the red king facing him, or to know his rider for a woman. But with his characteristic gaiety he

stood up for a second and sweeping the broad hat from his head, waved it in circles.

And Val Hannon, answering the stranger's signal, raised a hand above her head.

Then Velantrie was gone into the distance and she turned Redstar and went slowly down the dangerous trail, among the veils of purple and crimson and amethyst which the coming night was waving across her dreamy face.

CHAPTER IV

THE CROSS IN THE WILDERNESS

THE summer drowsed upon the land. The cattle moving in the sage cast up clouds of dust that hung for a time and settled back upon the spot. The winds had died this day and the brazen sun was monarch. Where the Little Antelope trickled sluggishly between its low banks, to nurse the straggling growth of trees that lined it, the heat was somewhat tempered. Cottonwoods grew here, tall and slim, and many *wasatcha* trees to spread their lacy shadow, and there were desert flowers planted in stone-edged beds among the sand, while the sword-like spikes of the *maguey* plant reached out to catch the unwary. This was a desert garden, rugged, grassless, inured to heat and drought, yet pleasant to the eye and mind as many a more favoured spot was not. It was hard and bare under foot, its walks swept daily by hands passionately eager to serve its master, and it was neat in all its corners. To the west of the garden and beyond the trees, standing out against the sun and the desert winds like a speared and shielded warrior, the long blank walls of the Mission took the light on their pale expanse in a way to be seen for many miles across the plains.

And it was a warrior, this aged and wind-worn

structure, its shield those same impregnable walls, its weapon the simple cross that caught the sunsets from its lofty roof, for beneath its spreading feet were gathered as sad and motley a crew as one might look upon in many a long day's search, and they were safe in its protection.

Peons, waifs on the changing tides of fortune, refugees from the turbulent land across the Border, those broken and dispossessed by the warring factions that destroyed their own and got nowhere, the sick in mind and soul and body—these came to the doors of Refugio and none was turned away.

For at those doors stood Father Hillairé in his worn old cassock, his rosary at his side and in his wise blue eyes the undying love for humanity that burned, a vital flame, lighted at the heart of God Himself.

For forty years Father Hillairé had watched the stretching plains. He had seen some piteous things, and more that were tragic, and some that were bright with faith and courage and everlasting fidelity—such as John Hannon's love for his blind wife—and he was gentle with understanding. He had said the service in Refugio when its ancient benches were packed with a dark-faced crew, and when there was no voice in the sounding spaces but his own to give response. Mexic, Indian, white renegade, they had fluxed and failed through gold-fever, cattle-war, peace and Border raid, a human stream from which he had striven ceaselessly to salvage drift. Many he had saved to better things,

some he had buried with tears of anguish on his own cheeks, and more had slipped away through his eager hands to drift and idle in the loose sinways that rived that lawless land.

But those who came to the Mission must work, for Father Hillairé was poor in worldly goods and the scant fare that was so free on the long board in the great bare living-room behind the church must be taken from the soil with unceasing labour.

Frijoles grew on the level stretches across the stream and a few bands of cattle ran on the open range, while sturdy grapes purpled on the wall that clasped the garden. Brown bread and milk and simple home-made wine, and the *frijoles* always, these waited the comer at the Mission steps, be it dawn or dark or in the dead of night. But sometimes the slices of the dark bread were thin, the tea strongly flavoured with sage, for gold came scarcely to the *padre's* coffers in these days, and there were so many things to buy in the distant towns—garments for his ragged refugees, tobacco for his aged pensioners who sat in the sun, their work-days done, and medicines for the abandoned girl-mother with her baby at her breast and her racking cough—and sometimes Father Hillairé was desperate in his need.

This day he sat in the shadow of the Mission among his dry garden beds and read his ancient books with comfortable pleasure, for two new derelicts on the sea of life had been added to his flock —and there had been beans in plenty and he had

watched them satisfy real hunger and follow Josephina to the inner regions for much needed sleep. These were two *peons,* a man and woman, whose last ragged sheep had gone to feed the no less ragged guerrilla band of some nameless *generalissimo* across the line, and who had given up in the last apathy of despair. They were worn and done from long foot-travel, and it had joyed the father's heart to take them in.

Therefore he read and smiled from time to time with the little creasing lines beside his gentle lips that made the babies cling to his hand, the lean dogs stretch at his feet in serene confidence.

The sun went down toward the west and the long blue shadows started out across the level floor from the lone shafts of stone and the table-lands of the *mesas,* and the little wind began to whisper from the south, while the wondrous colours came sifting through the light.

Those colours had been to Father Hillairé one of the priceless possessions of his life, a gift of God in all truth, a wonderful healing and inspiration.

Never was the day so dark, the future so uncertain, but that his burdened heart found peace and hope in their beholding.

Rose, lavender, amethyst, purple, they came sifting in the late light like fine gem-dust through the ethereal gold of the sunshine, to spread and drift all across the level world of the rangeland, masterpaints from the brush of the Master Artist.

Today, as they flushed the high vault above the

garden, Father Hillairé shut his beloved books and rose to greet them.

In that instant there came the sound of something more to greet—the long-roll of a running horse upon the distant plain.

He hurried to the opening in the high wall where the great gates turned back upon it and looked eagerly out. For a moment a pucker of concentration drew in between his brows, then smoothed away as the charming smile came upon his features.

"Ah!" he said aloud, delightedly, "Velantrie!"

It could be no other.

There was not in the land another pair like the two who came skimming forward like a swallow, the man and the horse—there could not be. They seemed not two but one, so perfectly did they blend together in motion and appearance. The rider carried his broad black hat in his hand and the wind of their coming blew the black hair back from his white forehead, and he looked for all the world like a little boy running to his mother, for his face was bright with laughter to greet the old priest in the gate.

"Father!" he cried as the great red horse thundered up to slide in the dust and stop with his haunches to the earth, his fiery eyes a-shine in his broad bay face, "*Padre! Ave!*"

He flung himself from the saddle and caught the *padre's* hands in both his own, pumping them up and down, boy-fashion.

"My son!" said Father Hillairé, gladly, search-

ing the sparkling face, "Son—son! It has been long, long since Refugio has seen you. Come in. Have you eaten?"

"Not since yesterday, but what matters?"

He laid an arm affectionately about the old man's shoulders and turned toward the garden, carefully gathering the bridle rein he had not loosed.

"What matters? I am a man who masters himself, father. My appetites, my passions—they serve me, not I them. I could go another day—two more days—without food and still ride to the Border."

He laughed and looked down in Father Hillairé's face, though the priest himself was a tall man.

So they entered the garden, drawing the great red stallion after, and the father stopped and securely closed the gates.

"Bonifacio," he called into the depths where the shadows were already falling, "come and take The Comet. Give him," he continued as a slim youth came briskly up through the *wasatcha* trees, "a little water—not much—and rub him down well. Then a feed from the bins in the north stable. Keep watch upon him thyself until I call. Come, Donald," and he led the newcomer in along the great wall of the church where the sturdy creepers grew to clothe it like a velvet garment, between the bordered beds, and to the high-ceiled living-room where the candles already glimmered in their black iron sconces and the sweet face of the Christ looked down from the dark walls in pitying compassion.

Dusky women, their faces meek with the sweetness of that house, went noiselessly about the setting of the evening meal, and old Josephina, for many years the chatelaine, greeted the stranger with a warmth of recognition in her wrinkled features.

"Señor!" she said, "you ride to Refugio again!"

"Again, Josephina," he answered, "the memory of your *frijoles* has caused me many an ache as I lay under far stars. I must return," and he spread his slim hands comically over the slender flatness of his middle region. The old woman laughed and turned eagerly toward the dim domain rearward from which came sweet odours.

Always a woman delights to feed a man, to see him eat to repletion, to gather the empty plates and cups afterward. It is a throwback to the days when food meant strength, and strength meant protection to her and to her offspring.

And so, presently, Velantrie of the Border sat at the long table with the *padre* of Refugio and ate as one famished, though with grace and manners. He bowed his black head through the short blessing and withheld his hand with a slow repression, though hunger was with him keenly.

Father Hillairé watched him with smiling eyes in which there was a shadow of sadness, and gossiped about a thousand innocent things, the young calves in the lean herds, the sickness that had taken sharp toll of his sheep, the news of the scattered ranches, though an observer would have noticed

that he carefully avoided all reference to those wild doings of the Border which furnished his salvage, the refugees and drift.

When the meal was finished the two men went outside again to the starlight and the dry garden, drew together the worn chairs by the little table where lay the ancient books, and talked in that deep communion which comes with liking and understanding.

Twilight deepened and the tip of Velantrie's cigarette glowed in the dusk, sign-manual of comfort.

They talked swiftly and nearly, and the *padre* leaned forward and laid his worn hand on Velantrie's knee.

"Oh, my son," he said softly, "I have grieved over this waste for all the months I have known you! Loss—loss! It is not right, a crime against humanity for a man like you—a man who can control himself—to cast his high chance to the four winds."

Velantrie smiled in the gathering darkness.

"You know, father," he said, "that I'd take that from none but you."

"I know," said the priest firmly, "and I dare. I have dared much in my time. The keen knife is the kindest. I dare because I love you."

"And I take it and come back—for the same reason. See," he laid aside the cigarette in his fingers and reached in a pocket on his hip.

"I have ridden a day and half a night to bring

you this. I will cover the same ground in the next few hours to get back from whence I came. But the bringing gives me joy."

He lifted the old man's hand and placed therein a buckskin bag, heavy, and musical with the dull clink of gold.

"Take it," he said, "it is yours."

But Father Hillairé shuddered and his fingers slipped loose from the other's pressure, so that the bag fell back upon the table.

"I—can't," he said sadly, "it is tainted gold."

"True," said Velantrie, gaily, "I took it from a mine-owner who owns a thousand *peons,* soul and body, who drives them through hunger and oppression down into the darkness of death with never a hope or a comfort." His soft voice had become suddenly hard and bitter.

"Damn him! I hope to break him this coming year—if I keep my breath that long."

Father Hillairé caught his own breath in a sigh.

"Oh, my son! I cannot vision such a thing! It cuts me to the heart! Give it up—give up this life. Start over—go away—into the north—somewhere—and forget these rides, these desperate risks, this dashing against the law of God and man! All these months I have prayed for you. I will continue until my object is attained. I must save you, son."

With a quick spring Velantrie was on his feet. He swept the bag of gold into his hand and held it out.

"Will you take it?" he asked evenly, "to buy food for your poor, your aged, your sick and your little ones that swarm here in your blessed garden? Or shall I ride south again and squander it on the gaming tables of Cejón and Caremente, on the girls of the dance halls?"

He was steady, cool, ready to do what he promised. Slowly the old priest rose to face him in the dusk. He stretched out a hand.

"I will take it, my son," he said, "a doubtful means to a holy end," and he took the bag of gold and dropped it in the deep pocket of his cassock.

"See," he said further, "the candles are lighted on the altar. It is time for the evening service. Will you not come in—just this once?"

Velantrie shook his head.

"Why ask me that, father? You know I am a man of sin, that I am forsworn. My foot would profane the Mission sill."

"Nay," said Father Hillairé, quickly, "it is laid for such."

"But not mine. You know my life—and what my future is. I cannot cross a church door—not I, with my pledge of blood. Forget it—and remember me, *padre,* at dusks like this."

Once more he smiled, that brilliant lighting of his lean face that shone like a fire behind a curtain, and putting a hand on the other's shoulder shook it gently. Then he whirled and put his fingers to his lips. The whistle that startled the quiet garden was enough to split the eardrums. Instantly

from the distant side of the enclosure where the stables stood there came an answer, a wild, shrill, heavy scream, the piercing neigh of a stallion, and a huge dark bulk came trotting swiftly down the walks beneath the trees, its rein, jerked from the hands of Bonifacio, dangling at its feet.

The Comet came to his master.

Velantrie put his palm to the horse's lips, their secret sign of greeting.

"Old man," he said gently, "*bueno.*"

"A wonderful creature," said Father Hillairé, "a king in all truth."

"Right. There isn't a horse like him in the world, father, not in all the world—save one. One other only—and when——"

But Father Hillairé interrupted hurriedly.

"Come, my son," he said quickly, "come with me to the door—just to the door. Will you not? The peace, the promise, of the holy place—will you not look upon them, even from afar—because I love you?"

For a moment the young man stood in silence. Then he shrugged his shoulders airily, took off his hat, touched The Comet with his fingertips, and followed the priest along the wall to where a narrow door let into the church at the side near the front. Here he stopped with his foot withheld from the sill.

He leaned forward with his shoulder in its flannel shirt against the lintel, his black head bare, his blue eyes steady and bright, and looked long and

in silence at the beauty of the altar with its hand-worked altar-cloth, its sacred adornments, its candles burning softly. The church was very old. Its vaulted roof was black with age, its every beam carved in entirety by long-vanished hands. Pillars, thick as a man's body, stood majestically down the centre, and along the walls hung the sacred pictures of the Stations of the Cross. At the left of the altar stood a lovely statue of the Holy Virgin, her beautiful ivory hands folded meekly on her breast, while at the right the Christ Himself looked tenderly down upon the dusk and the shadows and the emptiness.

Long Velantrie stood and gazed and his blue eyes between their dark lashes became very soft. The priest beside him, keen reader of the human face, saw that softening and his good heart leaped. He was too wise to press the slight advantage.

Instead, when the other stirred, he held out his hand.

"Good-bye, my son," he said gently, "come when you can, and remember that always at dusk your name ascends from this altar."

"Good-bye, father," said Velantrie, gravely, "*buenas noches. Valé!*" he added gracefully, giving the farewell in three tongues.

Then he gripped the other's hand hard, caught the pommel and leaped into the saddle without a foot to stirrup, though the great horse stood seventeen hands to his bare shoulder.

There was a sudden leap, a thunder of hoofs on

the hard-beaten earth, and they were gone, a wind and a bolt of speed, out through the gate which Bonifacio had opened.

For a long moment Father Hillairé stood in the dim light by the narrow door of the church and listened to the long-roll of their going, a lifting, exciting sound, and he shook his head and sighed and touched the gold in his pocket.

"I would that he came no more to this land of his destiny," he whispered miserably, "gay, reckless, lovable—and lost to all eternity. What if I told him of that other horse—that only other one in all the earth to match The Comet, the wondrous red king of John Hannon's brood? What, when he hears and knows—as he must surely do if he comes many times to Refugio from the oblivion of his Border-land of crime? Tragedy will some day stalk through the sunlight here—and I—I will be powerless to help! *Jesu mio,*" he whispered more sadly still, "it will be in higher hands than mine!"

Then he turned into the sacred dimness of the Mission where shrouded heads were bent between the benches and rosaries slipped through dark fingers, for the drift and the flotsam of Refugio were already gathered there.

As he mounted the altar steps he was still listening to the thunder of The Comet's mighty hoofs upon the plains, growing swiftly fainter in the summer night.

CHAPTER V

"WHY DON'T YOU RUN REDSTAR?"

NIGHT lay soft on Paradise. Under the blue-black dome of the starlit sky the great shadowy stretches of the rangeland went out and away into infinitude. The ancient house, curved round its *patio,* stood dark and forbidding, like a fortress. Among the purple iris the little whisper of Bluewater murmured in the silence.

Tree toads talked at intervals and a cicada shrilled its endless tune, while out in one of the gay-fringed hammocks young Felicita, slim and brown, listened with downcast eyes to the gentle voice of Arlas Gomez, also slim and brown, pleading the ancient tale in the ancient way.

"Listen, *corazón dulce,*" he whispered, "there is the empty cabin beyond the third corral. The Señor John will give it me for the fixing up a bit—new windows and the roof re-thatched with grass. I have three rugs, woven by *mi bisabuela,* and there are many cooking pots, little used, packed in the storeroom from the last round-up. The Señor John, now, he will give them me I know for the good work done at the branding. Did he not praise himself my deftness with the irons? You have only to say the word, *amor,* and we will go to Refugio, to the *padre*——"

But Felicita was coy and shook her black head and smiled maddeningly with a flash of her white teeth, and not even the lure of the three brilliant rugs of Arlas' great-grandmother could bring the coveted promise from her pretty lips. The boy pleaded despairingly while the cicadas sang and from the far corrals there came the scream of Redcloud, ramping in his pen.

In the great room of the deep adobe house there were no candles lighted, for though Fanita had come soft-footed to do that service, the master had waved her away. John Hannon sat in one of the big chairs with the cushions and smoked the short pipe that always rode in his inside pocket or between his lips, and listened in ineffable content to the gentle airs that came softly from the ancient keys under Belle Hannon's fingers. Old airs they were, songs they had sung together in their courtship, the sentimental tunes and words of two generations back, and to him they represented Music in its entirety.

Stretched on a couch in the farthest corner, her slim length well-nigh compassing it from end to end, her sun-browned hands beneath her head, Val lay and listened, too, though her thoughts were not in the past but the future—they had to do with the coming dance at Hunnewell's store, and with the gay bunch of riders from the outlying ranches who would be there in all their gala attire.

It would be Fourth of July and every cowpuncher who could straddle a cayuse would attend.

There would be races, and, as always, the Red Brood would be there, too.

All, that is, but Old Hotfoot, shut out of the excitement by constant motherhood—and Redstar the king.

Lightning would run away from all and sundry as he had done for two years now, and Dawnlight, if the master would put her up, would make a speedy showing, and this year, for the first time, the young matched racers, Firebrand and The Flame, would have their chance. Redcloud was getting a trifle old and she had overheard some talk between the boss and Tom Briston concerning his withholding.

Poor Redcloud—wild and strong and keen as the wind in spring!

She visioned him, screaming in his stockade, pounding the earth with his shining hoofs, when the rest went off to town—for the first time without him!

She frowned in the dusk with a quick sorrow for the old racer's passing.

Redstar now—Redstar the great king—he would graze placidly in his green field and take no note of the Red Brood's arrogance and pride as they trotted away, each with a rider in attendance.

He would not so much as raise his splendid head, blink his soft eyes.

And yet of them all he was the king—faster than their fastest, stronger than their best.

Why, wondered the girl as she had wondered

many times before, why was it that John Hannon never ran the king?

"Dad," she said presently, when there came a lull in the tinkling music while Belle Hannon hummed an elusive melody the better to bring it to her fingertips, "Dad—why have you never run Redstar in the races?"

"Eh?"

The rancher took the pipe from his lips suddenly and sat up in his chair. His handsome dark eyes, so like Val's own in one or two expressions, narrowed in the darkness.

"Why do you ask me that?"

At the tone of his voice any one on the *rancho,* save and except these two women, would have ceased to press the conversation.

"Why, I don't know," his daughter answered calmly, "except that, keen as you are on horseflesh and racing, you've never let him run. And you know, and I know, that he can beat anything under God's heaven that ever ran on these plains."

John Hannon put the pipe back between his lips.

"Perhaps," he said, "that's just th' reason. He's too good."

"Well—I guess that's so."

The girl studied a moment.

"That's so. There's nothing to run with him—not in a mile—nor a thousand miles! And he'd dwarf the Red Brood down to nothing. Yes—I see."

She lay silent, thinking, while the elusive melody, caught in Belle Hannon's pale fingers, came tinkling forth in the twilight.

At the end of an hour of perfect quiet, save for the old piano's voice, when her mother swung around on the ancient bench and the master rose to take the outstretched hand that had held him fast for lo, these many years, Val stretched her healthy young body and rose also.

"Dad," she said again, "did you ever see a horse that looked like Redstar in every line and motion?"

John Hannon stopped in his tracks, stockstill.

"No," he said at last sharply. "Why?"

"Because I did—from the top of Mesa Grande the other day—a horse that led a bunch of riders from up Leandra way—a horse that was a dead ringer for the Redstar, or I'm a liar. Colour, size, speed, action—it might have been the king himself. If I had not sat upon him myself that very minute I'd have said it *was* the king."

The rancher wet his lips, but he straightened up and, taking his wife's hand, led her out from behind the bench, his arm about her frail shoulders.

"You're seein' things, Val," he said with a careless laugh, "there's no hoss in this country that looks like th' Redstar. Th' height o' th' *mesa*—th' distance—they distorted your sight. No—there ain't no match fer him this side o'——"

"Where?" asked Val as her father paused.

"Hell," he said succinctly and led his wife away.

But just the same Val Hannon thought several times in the days that followed of the great red horse that ran on the spreading plain far off beyond the *mesa,* and wondered where it came from—for it was a stranger in the land, of course—and who its rider was.

He was young, she guessed, for the hat swinging in circles above his head that day had attested the exuberant spirit of youth.

But there were many things to think of beside a stranger and a mysterious horse—there was the dress for the coming dance, for instance, which she would make with her own clever fingers, what time she could spare from the sweeping rides on the plains, the romps with the dogs, the shrieking games about the *patio* with the brown babies of the Mexicans who served the *rancho.* These games were none too popular with John Hannon, who believed in his servants staying in their places—namely, at the northern part of the huge old house. He did not like their noise, fearing it might disturb Belle's tranquillity.

"Val," he said sternly a few days later, "why can't you keep that Mexican rabble where they belong?"

"Dad," she answered flippantly, "little things—like babies and kittens and puppies—belong wherever I am. And if I happen to be in the *patio,* why, how can I help it?"

Her father, floored by this audacious reasoning, snapped his fingers, as if he gave it up, and turned

away. But Val, swift on her feet as wind, leaped after him and slapping a hand on his shoulder, man-fashion, swung him to face her. The smiling, intimate look in her dark eyes, bent steadily on his own, melted his displeasure like snow before the sun and all was clear between them on the instant.

"Shake," the girl demanded further, holding out her hand after the manner of the game they had played from her babyhood when anything went wrong between them, and John Hannon struck his palm to hers, while the little crinkles came about his eyes, so that the two faces took on the same expression, were cast for an instant in the same mould.

"I'm your own daughter, old man," she said gaily, "chip off the old block—am I not?"

"Sure are," the boss answered proudly, studying her features.

"Bound to rule, then—eh? To have my own way—strong-headed—got to take the bit when I think I can—sometimes against odds?"

"Sure thing."

"Then, dad—you'll find the babies rolling on the walks sometimes—unless you whistle first—but if I'm like you there, rest assured that I am like you in other ways, too."

The laughter was gone from her face by this time, a quick gravity coming in its place, and she held hard to his hand.

"Like you in loyalty—in deep love—in courage, I hope. I'd be a poor substitute for the son you

never had if I was not all of that—a poor pupil with such a man as you before me in example."

But the rancher could bear little of that. Always at mention of such things he flushed beneath the dark tan of his skin and turned away, brusque and businesslike.

"He's a modest man, our dad, Belle," said Val this day, standing with a hand on a hip, watching him swing away down the shaded walk toward the stables at the north, "a very modest man! And handsome! It's a good thing I wasn't around when you and he were young, for I'd have fought you to a finish for him."

"He's the best man on this earth," Belle Hannon answered softly, "the most wonderful husband a woman ever had."

But if to his women John Hannon was good and brave and tender, combining the rugged qualities that passed for virtue in this wild land, there were others in the scattered community who thought differently—Quinlan of the Bar-Star, for instance, over at the southwest beyond the Broken Buttes, whose fine black racer, Live Coal, had been run off his feet by Redcloud in his prime—and the Attison boys, Sam and Dyke, of the Circle A, forty miles due west, whose tongues were not so guarded as they might have been.

"Funny thing John Hannon hain't never lost no cattle," Dyke had said once in Santa Leandra, "when every outfit this side the line, an' further

north than us, too, has stood to lose a share each year. What's his magic, I'd like to know?"

And John Hannon had heard the word and when next he met Dyke Attison he tapped the two blue guns that swung always at his hips and looked the other hard in the eyes.

"Here's my magic, Dyke," he said evenly. "Want t' see me make it?" And Attison looked back as hard.

"Not particularly," he answered, "but I don't take backwater for what I said. I'd still like t' know some things, bein' curious."

"Curiosity killed a cat, onct," snapped the boss of Paradise, "an' it ain't lost its power none. I'd hate t' haf' t' bore you, Dyke—but you'll either keep a careful tongue in your head about me, or draw quicker'n I can."

"An' you know you've got me there," Dyke said hotly, "an' not only me but every man on this here range—an' you use th' knowledge to bully th' country with——"

He never finished the sentence for John Hannon flashed a hand, lightning-swift, at his hip and shot him where he stood—a fine, clever bit of marksmanship that broke the right arm above the elbow and left Dyke Attison maimed for life.

Hannon stood holding the smoking gun that day and looked around the street of the sleepy town with his dark eyes narrowed to icy slits, and none spoke nor offered to help Dyke, clutching his shoulder and swearing in white fury.

"Shoot me full o' holes!" raved the latter, "sieve me if you want to! *But I'm still curious!*" which proved him a man of strong mettle, indeed, facing John Hannon's guns.

"I ain't killin' you t'day," said Hannon, "I'm teachin' you a lesson—an' any others that might be—too damned curious."

And he shoved the gun into its holster, turned on his heel and strode away without a backward look.

CHAPTER VI

THE CRY OF A DESERT OWL

"VAL darling," said Belle Hannon, groping through a door to the depth and coolness of the great room which was her daughter's own particular place, "how's the dress coming on?"

Val went quickly to meet her and drew her forward to a chair beside the deep slit of the west window. It was a rule of that house that none should pass those outstretched hands.

The master would have struck a servant who did so, and have spoken to his daughter in a tone she would have remembered for the same offence.

"Perfectly lovely!" cried the tall girl, "see."

And she snatched a fluff of white from the high-built bed and spread it on her mother's lap.

"There are gathers, little ones, about the neck and a pretty spreading ruffle. The sleeves are short —just a bit above the elbow. The skirt is full and has three little ruffles too. I shall wear my red silk sash and the Spanish shoes with the red heels that dad brought me last year when he came home from his trip. There are red roses beginning to bloom on the old bush beside the kitchen door and I'll put one of them behind my ear. I have the red feather fan, too."

"Beautiful!" said the woman, her sensitive fingers feeling expertly of the sheer material on her lap, "seeing" the make of the garment, "you will look like a full-blown rose yourself, Val, I know."

The girl laughed and a small dimple came out in her left cheek just above the lips' corner. Her dark eyes were melting soft at the vision of herself in all this finery.

"You just bet I will," she said serenely, and Belle laughed also. There was a close camaraderie between these two.

"And your father says Boyce Clendenning will be up from El Rio Rancho to run his silver horse."

Instantly Val frowned.

"Funny how dad likes that man," she said, "he thinks the sun rises and sets in him."

"He must be a good man, else your father would not think so," said Belle, quietly, "and isn't he young?"

"Yes."

"And handsome?"

"Yes, he is. Big, blond, heavy-shouldered, and with the smartest eyes I ever saw—except dad's when he's studying some one.

"Boyce Clendenning's got sense, I stake my pile."

"And he's got more than any man of his youth in all this country. The proper worth of El Rio Rancho itself makes him rich, not to mention the range he holds."

"All true, Belle dear," said Val, "but just the

same I'd rather dance with Billy Smith from the Lazy B, or that Texas boy who rides for Quinlan. 'And say, say, mama! but that boy can dance! He's slim as a reed and his feet are like tumble weeds in the wind. I hope he'll be in Santa Leandra this time. Haven't seen him for six months, not since the day I rode with dad after cattle down Arroyo Pecos way. Met him on the desert and had a talk, but dad was in a hurry, like he is always, and wouldn't let me stay half long enough."

"Nice boy, of course," said Mrs. Hannon, "but the daughter of the Boss of Paradise must look a little higher than a cowhand, dear. Your father has reached always for the highest, the best in its line, as he says of everything. 'I like it,' he says, no matter what it is, 'because it's the best in its line.' I guess he likes Clendenning because he's the biggest cattleman—after himself—in the country."

"I guess," said Val.

"That's why he loves the Redstar, too—why he's so proud of you, Val, and of Paradise. He's got the best in its line of everything the rangeland gives."

"In wives, too," laughed the girl as she put the finishing touch to the gauzy white fluff and hung it carefully away behind a curtain against the ancient wall. "I guess we're not some proud family, all right! Did you ever stop to think, Belle, that maybe we're *too* proud—that we are, maybe, arrogant? Father Hillairé now, look how he lays up for himself stores of riches in Heaven, and how

empty of pride he is. Pride—pride—I don't know —we're full of it—and, my sakes, proud that we are! But it's natural. Who on this earth could help but be proud of Paradise and the Red Brood! Only a dead man!"

And pride was in Belle Hannon as she rose and went swiftly and sure-footedly away into the northern regions of the house on some business of the mistress among her servants, humming a little soft tune—the pride of the loving heart in the strength and power of those it loves.

Val, clear of the tedious sewing, stretched her young arms, snatched a *sombrero* from a corner, drew a flannel shirt over her curly head, donned a riding skirt and ran out along the stone floor of the narrow veranda that edged the house and the *patio* both.

Three cowboys in dusty clothes were coming in from the corrals, Briston the foreman, Dirk Hammond and Rosy Peters.

At sight of the girl every pair of eyes softened, each lean face broke into a smile.

As if she did not see them Val strode briskly along and bumped into them—and they, knowing the little trick, leaned in together, making a solid wall of defence—the weakest wall of defence in all the world against the sweetest assault.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, gentlemen!" cried Val, her lovely eyes wide, "but you're all so small I —I nearly ran over you!"

"No offence, lady, no offence!" said Briston, po-

litely, as they yielded reluctantly to let her through, "we know o' course when one has such big feet they ain't careful where they step. Don't mind us," and he ducked to dodge the instant slap this sally brought from her none-too-gentle hand.

Chuckling the riders passed into the house, for Fanita was ringing the big bell that spelled dinner to those within its sound, but Val swung out to the corrals and looked among the horses there for Redstar. He was not there, but Redcloud was, trotting restlessly about, his beautiful head tossing, his pasterns springing with every step, pliant as tempered steel.

"José," she called to a lad beyond a fence, "where's the red king?"

"The Señor John, he rides to *el oeste* today."

So. The boss rode west. And he rode Redstar, of course.

Well, she would take Redcloud—or no—there was Dawnlight drowsing in the sun, belying her name and her nature with seeming meekness. Val caught her up and flung a saddle on her shining back—and the vixen spread her slim legs, drew in a deep breath and lifted her spine a trifle, ready for something when the cinches should tighten up.

But Val Hannon was her father's girl in her utter lack of fear of horseflesh, in her masterful spirit.

Now she laughed and set a quick knee against the mare's ribs and jerked the latigo with a practised hand.

"You would, would you, you pretty wildcat?" she said, "well—swell—swell if you want to!"

And she pushed the breath out of Dawnlight's lungs with every pull of the strap.

The high-tempered creature switched her long tail and laid her pointed ears back along her neck and her eyes flashed, but Val put a heavy hand to her bit and set her back with a jump.

In the midst of the action the girl put her foot to the stirrup and went up like a cat. Dawnlight screamed and flung herself sidewise, shaking her head, but Val lifted her on the bit and came down with her braided quirt across the shining flanks—and Dawnlight steadied like a lady, prancing out of the corral on all four feet, properly. This was the only one of all the Red Brood who needed discipline.

Once out of the yard and beyond the house with the open plain before her she broke into instant flight and sailed down and away like a bird, a wondrous, easy gait, swift and light and sure, that brought a smile of pleasure to her rider's face and forgiveness for her faults. It was noon and the vast spread of the range country lay clear and sharp beneath the light. The distant *mesas*, great, flat-topped, straight-sided remnants of a prehistoric level, some of them a mile long and half that wide, stood here and there on the floor of the plain, monstrous, imposing. Bunch grass, mesquite, with here and there a tall cactus spike, grew so sparsely that one strange to the country might marvel how

the cattle lived. But they did live, huge herds of them, and waxed fat, were rounded up, looked over, the young ones branded, the beef cut out and driven away to the tiny station on the thin line of steel that linked the cattle land to the distant outside world.

Val rode down between the weathered monuments, left Paradise miles to the north and west, crossed the Little Antelope, where she let the mare drink deep of the brackish water, and came up out of its shallow dip between the scattered cottonwoods that fringed it.

Before her, some three miles off, the gaunt, pale bulk of Refugio Mission stood boldly out. Val smiled and struck her heels to Dawnlight's flanks and rode fast toward the ancient landmark. Afar off they heard her coming, for much of this land was hollow somewhere beneath, so that the open stretches were like a mighty sounding-board, carrying the long roll of a running horse to ears far distant.

Father Hillairé stood to greet her in the gate, as he had stood to greet so many, but few comers to Refugio brought with them the joy to light his kindly face that shone there now.

He had known Val Hannon from her babyhood, had seen her take her first steps, had held her in his arms at the christening font, and from the first wide, grave stare of her dark baby-eyes, had loved her with all his tender heart. He had heard her small sins, had taught her the depth and sweet-

ness of religion as he conceived it, and she was sweet and wholesome as a flower new-blown.

But she was daring as a young boy, wild in her riding, keen for the open and had little of the pretty tricks of indoor women.

Now she flung off her horse, caught the father's hand, stooped impulsively and kissed it, then shook it like a man with a strong grip, and looked up in his face with the crinkling about her handsome eyes that made them woman-soft on the instant, no matter how wild she had been with sun, wind and speed a second before.

Always when Val dashed up like this Father Hillairé thought of another who came in much the same way, another wild rider, but who, alas! came usually with the night and whose name did not pass the *padre's* lips.

"Father dear," said Val, "how are you?"

"Well, my daughter," he answered, "and happy in my humble walks."

"Then you've been getting some more refugees," said Val with conviction, "for only when you sling another load to your shoulder do you speak like that. And already the load is sky-high and ready to topple. You're some juggler, *padre,*" she added fondly, "to always keep in under. How's Josephina?"

"Excellent."

"And Maria and her baby?"

"Not so well, I'm sorry to say. The cough, it stays with her, and the baby pulls her down and she

grieves ever for the worthless one who left her to face despair."

Val clicked a pitying tongue and turned in at the gate of the garden.

Bonifacio, without being called this time, came eagerly and took Dawnlight, getting as reward one fleeting smile from the girl which brought a sparkle to his dark face, for this Val Hannon was beloved by those who knew her, high and low alike.

"I'll come back, father," she said, smiling, "but first I must go and see Maria and Josephina and the new refugees—for I know I'll find some."

And she went swiftly into the house and passing through the room with the long tables and the pictured Christ, leaned in the door to the kitchens.

At the far end Josephina, the slim elderly woman, dark as a berry, who had been housekeeper there for more years than Val could remember, exclaimed softly in Spanish and came forward to pat her arm and smile and talk swiftly of the doings of the Mission and the distant *rancho.*

Father Hillairé waited patiently for a long hour, while Val went through the labyrinth of rooms and sat on the sanded walks under the *wasatcha* trees with Maria's baby on her lap, and listened to the latest tale of atrocities across the Border whence came the new refugees.

At the end of that time she came back to him, carrying her hat in her hand, and sat by the table in the shade and visited in that deep communion which attends friends.

She told him of the dance to be in Santa Leandra, of the new white dress, and described minutely the red-heeled shoes, the sash and the way the rose from the old bush would hang behind her ear.

The priest listened gravely and with as much interest as though she discussed the year's rain and the scant crops.

The sun went down the heavens and the wondrous colours came sifting out of Infinitude, and at last the girl rose swiftly and called for Dawnlight.

"I always forget, father," she said, "how the time flies when I am here. Dark will catch me now."

So she mounted and leaned to press the *padre's* hand, and presently she was gone, down across the levels toward the Little Antelope, a streak of colour in the lovely light, and Father Hillairé smiled as he watched her. There was never a sigh in his heart for her. She was the best the country held, that he knew, pure, quick, clean of heart and mind and soul, strong with courage, tender with unawakened love, the most admirably fitted creature he had ever known for the great game of life.

Nay—harm would leave Val Hannon far and bye.

Goodness, calm, joy, these must be her portion if there was any truth in the old belief that virtue prospered, and Father Hillairé was at peace for her.

She was the shining star of his service, the thing that he had helped to mould and make, and he was

proud of her as so humble a man might be of his handiwork. In his pride he gave full credit to the sweet and gentle nature of Belle Hannon in its influence upon her—but he gave no thought to that strong man, her father.

John Hannon and Father Hillairé had looked into each other's eyes for years with a veiled understanding that never passed their lips in question or answer.

"Dawnlight, my beauty," said Val as they stretched away on the other side of the Antelope, "we'll have to run if we make it home by good dark. Don't think we will at that."

The racer needed no further urge. The rein laid loose on her neck was like a flame to tow. She dropped her slim loins, laid her long neck out in a straight line with her back, her nose almost in line, and gathering her shining hoofs beneath her began to drum such music from the plain as set Val smiling with the joy in speed that always possessed her when the Red Brood ran.

For a long time Dawnlight did not change the humming note of her stride, while the levels raced away beneath her and the purple and amethyst and lavender came sifting down through the gold of the late light, and the soft wind hummed by, but presently she slowed and, coming down to a trot, swung her graceful feet with a neat precision. Far ahead Arroyo Pecos, deep and dark and fringed with a thick growth of low bushes, cut across the land.

Night was coming swiftly.

The rose and lavender gave place to cool blue shadows, the sun went down behind the Broken Buttes far, far over to the west, and twilight set in. Stars came out on the pale sky and Val carried her hat in her hand, while Dawnlight, eager for home and her kind, mended her pace to a little lope.

Long before they made Arroyo Pecos it was dark, the soft warm dark of the half-desert country.

Where the dim trail dipped down the steep banks of the cut and the shadows were darkest, Dawnlight snorted and halted, to pound on the brink with her sharp hoofs.

"What ails you?" said Val aloud, "afraid of a little dark? Go on."

And the mare went, though with deep breaths of suspicion that whistled in the night. Down and across and up they went, swiftly, and were all but on the levels again, when Val jumped in her saddle, for a desert owl cried almost in her ear from the thick bushes on her left—cried and waited and cried again, to be answered far up the arroyo, and to be still.

Dawnlight raced away toward the distant sanctuary of Paradise, and the girl in her saddle never knew that the owl had voiced a warning, nor that, an hour later, two men rode out of Arroyo Pecos by different ways, one, a huge, square figure of a man on a swift and heavy horse, toward the south, the other to the north.

Never knew that, had she been below the rim of the cut, so that she might look up against the

stars, she would have known the great red horse that heaved his massive withers over the brink with ease and power for Redstar the matchless—nor the man in his saddle for the Boss of Paradise.

CHAPTER VII

THE FOURTH AT SANTA LEANDRA

THE glorious Fourth came up across the range-land as all Fourths should, clear, bright, warm with sun and cool with a little wind that would soon die and leave heat and dust to rule.

At Paradise a small tragedy had been enacted, for Redcloud for the first time in his life had been left behind when the Red Brood went away to run. Alone in his paddock the old racer ran this way and that along the fence, his head high on his lifted neck, his eager eyes straining into the distance toward the north and west where yesterday at dusk those other favoured ones had been led away, each beside a leading horse, their red coats shining in circles from much rubbing, their neat hoofs dancing. For the first time the stallion had been adjudged unfit to go—to go on a halter, with a rider in attendance.

He was to go indeed, though in another capacity, for Val Hannon's heart was sore for him and she groomed him with her own hands, combed his flowing mane and tail, and put upon him the splendid silver-mounted bridle that was the Redstar's own.

"It's a shame," she said aloud as her father passed the corral, "after all he's won for you, dad. You should have let him go and learn his defeat

slowly—with the others finishing ahead—not this way with his heart breaking."

"No," said John Hannon, sharply, "Redcloud's done. There's nothing goes to the running from Paradise but what's th' best—what can make good."

"Wrong," said Val, "the Redstar's the best—and he don't go."

John Hannon did not answer and Dirk came out with a cow pony ready to ride the twenty miles to Santa Leandra with her, and Val must run into the house to get the neat flat package that held her finery and was to be tied behind Dirk's saddle, to kiss her mother and push Fanita laughing into a corner. The sun was coming up on the peaks of the Blind Trail Hills, it was Fourth of July and she was young.

So presently she rode out of the corral on Redcloud, her dark eyes shining and with roses in her dusky cheeks—and Dirk beside her rested adoring eyes upon her.

As they turned away toward the north Val turned in her saddle, halted, for from far down in a stretching field there came, clear on the morning air, a keen and ringing call—the whinnying cry of a horse to his beloved—and Redstar stood, a spot of colour on the green, his head high, his nostrils blowing, his soft eyes watching eagerly.

The girl rose in her stirrups and, cupping her hands to her lips, whistled the two keen notes, though this time they were reversed—the first one

falling, the second rising. This was not "Come" but "Good-bye,"—and they held more portent than she knew.

Then she went forth to the joy of a ride at dawn, the visit to the town, which was a rare experience to her, the dance and the races.

Santa Leandra was gay with life. Its straggling street was bright with women in their cheap finery, with Indians in bright coloured blankets, with youths and maidens walking together and with uncounted children and dogs.

At Hunnewell's the tables were crowded full of players and Hunnewell himself, genial, perspiring, mopped up his ancient bar before a changing but constant line of men in chaps and sombreros.

The punchers were in from all points of the compass. They had ridden the range for months with little diversion, had handled rope and branding-iron, had saddled their untamed cayuses in frost and wind and sandstorm, and now they were entitled to the full measure of merrymaking, and out to get it.

Wide hats, adorned with silver coins, sat rakishly on arrogant heads, silver-spotted belts and riding cuffs were in evidence everywhere, and poor indeed was the cowboy who could not sport a fancy pair of chaps, carved spurs and flaming red, pink or green "sleeve-histers."

They teetered about on their high heels, rode up and down the street on prancing horses, discussed the coming races and laid bets on this horse or

that. Down at the south end of town the horses that were to run were gathered in small corrals, all with their people in close attendance, and a constant stream of observers came and went.

"Th' Hannon bunch looks fit this year, an' no mistake," said a man from over by the Broken Buttes, "but where's th' old stallion?"

"Ain't runnin' him," answered Briston, shortly.

"No? What fur? 'Fraid o' Clendenning's silver?"

"'Fraid o' nothin'," said the foreman, pointedly, "simply ain't runnin' him this year."

Clendenning's silver horse, Dollar, was good and sufficient cause for fear as he squealed in his pen and watched the rest with wild dark eyes, and so was the young black mare, Silkskin, bone's bone and blood's blood of that once famous runner, Live Coal from the Bar-Star beyond the Broken Buttes. Quinlan had never forgiven Redcloud for that far-past defeat, nor his owner either.

Val and Dirk came into town a little before noon and Redcloud pranced and tossed his head, thinking it was old times again and perhaps visioning the orgy of running to come.

The girl's dark eyes were alight with pleasure as she took in the brilliant crowds, and they crinkled joyously when the Texas boy spied her and came swinging gracefully up to greet her with a hand at his hat-brim. Dirk frowned, for all Paradise was jealous of its sovereign.

"I'll be boun'!" said the stranger in his soft

drawl, "You did get heyh, Miss Val! I ben a-waitin' an' watchin' fer you sence nine o'clock. Got t' speak fer some dances ahead, an' I so do, right this minnit. Y'all won't forget me, come night?"

"Sure won't, Texas," promised the girl warmly, "I've been counting on dancing with you myself—for your feet are sure like thistle floss, boy, and no mistake."

And she passed on to the corrals where Briston stood to take the horses. Rosy Porter and Perly Jacks and Siff O'Neil, all riders for Paradise, crowded around her.

"Val," said Perly, "how you goin' to divide th' day? Who's goin' to walk about with you first?"

"Any way suits you, boys. Toss jacks, I guess."

And the cowboys drew a line on a convenient post and proceeded gravely to throw their jack-knives at it. Perly and Siff tied, the others fell out, and the honour at last fell to the former, who promptly cocked his broad hat on his curly yellow head, pushed his studded belt down about his slender hips, patted the knot of his gay kerchief, and went off beside her, proud as Lucifer to swagger about Santa Leandra with Val Hannon, the little-known but much-stared-at beauty girl of the bunch-grass country.

Ah, Fourth of July when one is young and lives far and bye from civilization!

They sauntered up the straggling street and gazed happily and interestedly at all they met, and

Val remembered that she had not warned the boys to be careful of that package on Dirk's saddle and must needs rush back to the corrals, her new riding skirt swishing at her heels, to tell them to get her a room at the Hudson House and put it away therein to await the evening and the dance.

She was gay as an Indian herself in her scarlet silk waist, black tie and tan riding skirt, which same outfit she would wear all day, and she was happy as a lark.

She encountered some few people that she knew, a girl from a ranch far north, several cowboys, and lastly Boyce Clendenning, handsome in his heavy blond way and lazily interested in her. He was far more interested in this quick dark girl than was apparent on the surface.

"Will you eat dinner with me, Val?" he wanted to know abruptly, standing before her in the beaten dust of the trampled street—and Perly flushed red beneath his golden tan.

The boy bit his lip and wait

Val—their Val—eat dinner with any one beside the bunch from Paradise? It would be a sacrilege, a humiliation and a cause for battle! Dinner under the tall elms in the grove at the north end of town where the barbecued beef, pork and mutton scented all the air, and the long board tables were spread for all and sundry, was an institution of the rangeland Fourth. She who sat down thereto with any man as good as belonged to him all day—for the games, the races and the dance at night.

It was significant of Paradise that not one puncher sought him a girl, that all would attend in a body with John Hannon's daughter in their midst, proud of her beauty, alert to every word or look—all, that was, save Tom Briston, whose first, last and only care was the five red horses in his charge.

Now Val looked Clendenning over coolly and shook her head.

"No," she said, softening her refusal with a smile, "I've got my partners—five of them."

Perly reached up an eloquent hand and pushed his hat forward from behind.

"Nice day," he observed pensively.

Clendenning did not flush nor change the steady gaze of his blue eyes.

"Lucky five," he said gently, "suppose you'll give me a dance or two then—after the five?"

"You bet," said Val.

"Say, Val," said Perly when they were beyond earshot, "that Boyce Clendenning's got th' nerve of a dozen bobcats, ain't he?"

"Sure has," said Val with conviction.

Dinner took an hour—and suffice it to say in passing, that every one from Paradise did it full justice. Shortly after the crowds began to gravitate, as by common impulse, toward the southern end of the town where the open plains came up abruptly, where the corrals stood and where the "race track" lay. This was simply a long level

stretch, flat as one's palm and soft with trodden loam, the most natural and ideal track in the world.

There was no fence about it and the gay crowds strung out along its entire length. It fell to Siff to look out for Val, and never did man accept honour more delightedly. Siff was young and full of laughter, vain as any O'Neil before him had ever been, and they sauntered halfway down the track, craned their young necks for a good vantage for both start and finish and sat down on the naked earth as simply as the squaw a rod beyond.

"I say, Siff," said Val, eagerly, "the horses do look fine. They'll run away from this bunch easy."

"Fine's th' word, but they sure got a bunch t' run from this year. Last year it was Brightstone Kit, an' th' glass-eyed pinto that th' Injuns brought in from th' hills, an' th' bay horse from nobody-knew-where that they said belonged to th' Black Rustler. They was not so bad, either, 'petic'lar that there last. But this time it's some different. That there Silkskin, now, she's some horse, I stake my money! She's some baby!"

"Bah!" said Val, hotly, "I'm some surprised that any one from Paradise could look at that black skate twice when the Red Brood's in. What do you think this track'll look like when Lightning comes running down it like an engine? We can't say yet about Firebrand and The Flame, though you know how good they are at home. If only Dawnlight'll be a lady, now——"

But there was a dust and the shine of horses at

the track's head and Val was on her feet instantly, her sentence forgotten. Bay, brown, sorrel, five horses pranced at the starting line. Closing her eyes to slits to sharpen their vision she descried Dawnlight ramping on her bit with Perly trying to quiet her.

Three times they made false start. The fourth they were away and the entire human fringe edged in on the track to watch them come.

"Hi! Yi! Yi!"

The yells yipped down the track in a wave as the beautiful creatures lay down to earth and ran in pure joy of the open, the light and their own free power and speed.

Dawnlight was the only well-known horse in this heat, the others being newcomers from up north. For a time they were well bunched and Val held her breath. Then the red mare, stretching out like a shaft of light, began to forge ahead.

"Running away!" cried Val, "Coming! Coming!"

"Wait!" warned Siff with an anxious frown.

And almost on the word Dawnlight threw up her head, broke and pitched off to one side, wild and ugly as a demon.

"Damn!" cried the cowboy frankly.

The big brown gelding came running in far ahead.

Twice in the three heats that made the race Dawnlight was to ramp out and be disqualified.

"Dad will never let her run again when he hears this," said Val, "and I don't blame him, either."

But the mare was forgotten, for the first heat of the next race was coming on and they could see the brilliant shine of Firebrand and The Flame, pretty, nervous youngsters, among the darker horses. Silkskin was there, and two other blacks and a rangy Indian claybank, but the flame-red colts with their creamy manes and tails took the eyes of all beholders. They were gentlemen, too, minding their orders and sweating with nervousness—eager as wind to be gone.

And when they were gone, at last—gone with an even start, neck and neck with Silkskin and the claybank, they ran like wind indeed—light on their drumming feet, skimming the earth like swallows.

"Lord! Lord!" said Val, softly, her eyes like stars, "you darlings! You blessed darlings!"

For Silkskin was drawing away from the rest like the centre of a rising stream—and the tossing cream crests were flanking her on either side!

Silkskin was far and bye the best—coming true to the predictions for her—and the younglings from Paradise were keeping pace with her faithfully.

Farther and farther stretched the distance between the three and those behind—they flashed by Val and Siff and shot under the wire nose and nose and nose!

The fringes surged into the track after them and yelled like mad.

"Some hosses!"

"Something new in ol' Santa Leandra!"

"Good enough t' run with Dollar!"

While Dirk walked the colts about and the hum of voices grew like swarming bees, the first heat of the day's big race was on. This comprised Dollar, the famous silver; a dark horse brought in from somewhere at the last moment, though it had been duly entered; and Lightning.

Sane, gentle, alert Lightning strode to the start and waited like the gentleman he was, with Rosy on his back.

Val could see the shine of his red coat between the light of Dollar and the shadow of the stranger. She could hear the voices betting and appraising and knew that he was dividing the money with Clendenning's horse.

There was little jockey work this time, for these horses were old to this game and it was only a matter of moments until they were away and coming steadily down the stretch.

Ah! This was running!

Well matched all three, they hummed down the track evenly for the first quarter. Their slim legs were a blur beneath them, their necks were a straight line, their eager faces keen as flame on a night sky.

Dollar was running as he *could* run, a machine, steady, true, perfect, keyed to a rising note. He set the pace and kept it lifting, gaining, gaining in speed with every jump. And at his side Lightning ran, but differently. If Dollar was a machine,

Lightning was a living, breathing, aspiring bundle of nerves and brains. Like a wind, like a fire in grass, as they said of the Red Brood always, he came down the track, instinct with life.

Slowly the strange horse fell behind and the two others began to run away from him. For another quarter they drummed down together, neck and neck, flashing eyes by flashing eyes.

And then Rosy lay down on Lightning's neck and reached a hand caressingly out along his cheek.

"Come on! Come!" he yelled—and the red horse came!

Ah! There was "somethin' by-ordinary in that Lightnin' horse," as his master had said once.

Now, at his rider's call he caught a great breath into his lungs, dropped his slim belly down to mother earth—and simply ran away from Dollar, the best horse in the range country hitherto.

Far out ahead he poked his nose under the wire—and came down from his speed as quickly as he could, a gentleman always.

The crowds were yelling and Val wiped a hand across her misty eyes.

"Siff," she said unsteadily, "we don't want Redstar to run! Not ever! Lightning's good enough for us!"

With tingling delight the girl watched the other heats of the rest of the races, and when the great day was over Dawnlight was in disgrace forever, the younglings had won a name by finishing two heats out of three nose and nose with Silkskin,

while nothing in the entries had kept in sight of Lightning.

"It's been a great day," she said happily as she walked through the dust with Siff down to the corrals to talk it all over with the boys, and to pet the shining beauties, one by one.

"Dawnlight, poor girl," she said pityingly, "why is it that you are cursed with such a vile temper?"

"She's cussed with devilment!" said Perly, viciously, for he was sore to the heart with the mare's ruin. Secretly Perly loved the uncertain vixen above all the Red Brood and had hoped great things from today. Now they were dead dreams, indeed, and he was sore, sore.

But Briston took them all, victor and vanquished alike, into the shelter of his wise care and dusk found them blanketed and close-herded in their corral, their names, and John Hannon's, on the lips of all the rangeland.

Once more had the Boss of Paradise proved his passion for "the best in its line."

With the coming of twilight Val vanished from Perly's watchful eyes into the recesses of the Hudson House to prink and preen with the girl from up north, to emerge with the first strumming of the fiddles across the road at Hunnewell's, sweet as a dark flower in her white dress with the red sash, the Spanish shoes, the rose behind her ear—which same big bud had ridden wrapped in wet cotton in a little wooden box in the bundle—and with the

red feather fan hung to her brown wrist by a ribbon.

In the middle of the bunch from Paradise—all save Dirk whose first watch it was at the corrals—she entered the great room of the store where everything movable—save and except the bar—had been removed, and she was proud as any queen riding between her loyal subjects—proud with the pride of Paradise.

CHAPTER VIII

A RUSTLER'S HAND

HUNNEWELL'S store had been cleaned and decorated for the occasion. The erstwhile dim windows shone clear, the worn floor had been swept and smoothed with sand and water, while from the smoky rafters hung yards and yards of ancient bunting which had seen many a Fourth. Benches had been placed along the walls and on them bloomed a gay border of sturdy rangeland flowers, matron, maid and comely half-breed, with here and there a full-blood squaw frankly wrapped in her blanket, and all were decked in their best. All would dance, too, or nearly all, for this was a land of few distinctions.

In the northeast corner a platform had been erected and on it sat two men, their fiddles pressed to their shoulders, or held on their knees while they tightened and picked judicially at the whanging strings.

One was a young chap from up along the river, the other Doc Tackert, weazened, old, spry as a kitten and such a wizard with bow and catgut that he was known afar with a shining fame. The hum and whisper of a gathering crowd was to him like smoke to a war-horse, an excitement, an inspiration and an intoxicant.

Now he tucked his instrument beneath his wrinkled chin, flourished his bow, began to pat with his cowhide boot in exact and perfect time, and swept forth in some rousing tune of the time and place.

There was a surge of cowboys across the floor, a great bowing, a rustle of rising women, and the voice of the caller cutting high above the music.

"Git yore pardners!"

Hunnewell's was a large structure. On the cleared floor four sets could dance with ease at once. In a twinkling, it seemed, these were formed, all in their places, all orderly and waiting for the word to begin.

A garden of butterflies, a close of variegated flowers, a web of colour, was Hunnewell's floor that night. Cowboys in gay silk shirts, studded belts, corduroys and soft "store" shoes, led out girls and women in all the tints of the rainbow.

"S'lute yer pardner!"

The web sank and rose in billows with the bowing heads.

"Lead th' lady an' shun th' gent!"

Hands reached for hands like scuttering leaves in a wind.

"Back to th' place from whar ye went!"

The web broke and moved, swift, scintillant, gay, a mass of swishing skirts, of slipping feet, of happy eyes of laughter and of light, and the dance was in full swing.

In the thick of it moved Val Hannon, sweet, smiling, her dark cheeks flushed like the sunsets on the

mesas, her dark eyes sparkling like harbour lights, her filmy ruffles flying, her swift feet in their vanity of Spanish shoes with the red heels slipping light as thistledown in the mazes of the figures. Opposite her danced Briston, whose place and honour it was to have the first dance by reason of his standing at Paradise. The foreman was nearing the forty mark in years, but he was a handsome figure of a man, slim-hipped, tall, easy as a youth and he had danced before Val was born.

He had taught the girl her first steps, and they met, swung, parted and bowed with perfect rhythm and accord. So beautifully did they step together that, in a land whose people danced from babyhood, they drew attention and admiring comment.

"Who's th' big girl in th' red sash?" a blond boy wanted to know of Perly. "My aunt Maria! but she can swing them pretty feet!"

"That's Miss Val Hannon," said Perly, stiffly, "from Paradise Ranch."

"Oh! Th' hell you say!" said the boy softly, round-eyed, "I've heard of her a lot. Know her?"

"Ought to," answered Perly, softening but prideful, "ride fer Paradise."

"Oh! Interduce a feller?"

"Sure," Perly flicked an imaginary speck from his immaculate pink silk sleeve, "after we've all danced with her. There's five of us an' we always come first with Val."

The boy was properly impressed but he did not

fail to haunt Perly until, later in the night, he got the coveted dance.

As Val wove in and out among the dancers her keen eyes were taking in all there was to see—the dresses of the women, the good dancers among the men, the prettiest girls.

And so it was that when the "square" was done and she was drifting around the hall with Rosy in a waltz, she looked down into the upturned small face of a girl so dark, so brilliant of eye and cheek, so vital, that she turned her head and gazed after her in wonder.

Like a flame, like a flower, like something full-charged with life and beauty, Lolo Sanchez swept and drifted this way and that, brilliant as fire in her scarlet and black, and she, too, wore a deep red rose behind her little ear. For some unaccountable reason, half unconsciously, Val Hannon raised a hand a little later and pulling the bud from her own dark hair, dropped it unseen in a corner.

A polka followed the waltz, and a schottische the polka, and once more a square dance, and Val parcelled them painstakingly among her own cohort —after which the Texas boy was promptly at her elbow with his soft eyes and his softer voice.

"Ef I might make so bold, Miss Val?" he insinuated gently, holding out an arm with an elaborate crook.

And Val, delighted, thrilling with the joy of youth and the charm of the stranger, swung out with him in another waltz.

Perly and Rosy and Siff and Dirk, all in the full tide of the celebration, each had him a lady and "went to it" with the vigour stored from six months' hard work on the range. Not since the Christmas "doings" had they shaken a foot, and they made up for lost time. But though they tapped their high heels with the best of them, cut pigeon wings on the corners, and made gay love to this girl and that after the happy fashion of their kind, it was a noticeable fact that not one rider from Paradise frequented the long bar set well back at the side.

Rosy and Siff were known to "cut it high, wide and handsome" upon occasion, and neither Perly nor Dirk were saints, but when John Hannon sent his daughter forth in their midst they neither looked at, smelled nor tasted the customary refreshment of the region.

After the first number Briston had gone back to the horses and sent Dirk to the merrymaking. The boy had protested but the foreman pushed him out with a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Go on—go on—don't try t' tell me you'd jus' as soon stand guard with the ponies. Don't I know how your feet are itchin'?" And the speaker grinned with memories of fifteen years agone.

So the summer night waxed toward midnight, dark with black velvet sky, soft with a million stars, and Santa Leandra danced the hours away. The town was full of horses tied to every tree and hitchrack, waiting with the patience of the plains

breed for the masters who were ever prone to tarry.

"Swing yore pardners!" came the cry of the caller above the swish of slipping feet, "Ketch that gal an' sashay by! Rope that heifer with th' rollin' eye! All han's roun'!"

Late in the night, in the cool short hours, a group of horsemen rode in from the open levels and tied their mounts well out among the cottonwoods at the west. A little later new faces appeared among the crowd that surged in and out of the door at Hunnewell's. Sharp, alert faces they were, every one, their keen eyes moving under their hat-brims with quiet watchfulness.

These strangers came in unostentatiously and stood in a bunch, somewhat close together. There were nine of them, all clad in good garments, the best that money could buy in a wider market than the rangeland owned. Their soft fine boots were stitched in colours, their hats were very wide and ornamented with much silver after the fashion of their kind across the line, and they wore handsome belts and spotted cuffs, while silver spurs, their long shafts minutely carved by hand, jingled on their heels.

In a land where many mysterious strangers rode now and again and none asked their business, these men drew instant attention. There was something vital about them, something tense and guarded. They stood quietly and watched the dancers, and in their midst stood one who was of a different mould.

Tall, slim, fine of feature and form, smiling, his reckless face a-sparkle with the joy of youth in music and motion, this man was not so guardedly alert, and he carried his hat in his hand. Thick black hair waved back from a handsome brow, white with the bleach of the sweatband, sign manual of him who rides much in the open.

His blue eyes under their black lashes roved over the dancers with a bright bold glance.

"C'rall yore pardners!" and the "square" was over.

But old Doc Tackert was celebrating high himself and he gave scant time for breath between the numbers. His weazened face was hot with the liquor which Hunnewell lavishly provided on a tray on the platform's edge, and he stopped but for another sip, changed one knee over the other, snapped his fiddle strings and swung forth in another waltz.

As the couples drifted out again Lolo Sanchez, a living flower in her black and scarlet, came down the room in the arms of a big blond boy, her small face upturned, her coquette's heart playing the old game in her dusky eyes. The boy, none other than the one who had asked Perly about Val earlier in the night, was plainly in bad case, far gone in the thrall of the little vixen, his young head turned completely. He danced and never took his eyes from hers, or from the silken top of her smooth small head. Lolo was happy and as cruel as a hawk.

And then—the boy swung her past the door and she looked up full into the smiling face of the stranger.

"Velantrie!" she breathed to herself.

"What?" asked the boy, but she did not hear.

From that moment she forgot him utterly.

When the dance ended Lolo stopped, as if by accident—something about the tiny slipper that encased her light foot—bent and straightened it—close by the door. As she rose, quick as a willow wand released, she looked into Velantrie's eyes and her own were eloquent.

"Master!" she murmured in Spanish, so low that none but he caught the soft word. Then she was gone with never a backward glance. Lolo was an artist thrice refined. She knew men instinctively.

She knew well that this stranger cared not a whit for her, that not even her spectacular offer of herself for Brideman's stake that day had touched him, but she meant to touch him.

Therefore she whispered one thrilling word and left him as if she had not spoken.

"Who's th' chap by th' door?" the blond boy asked suspiciously, but Lolo looked up innocently.

"Which one?" she asked, and the suspicion died.

The newcomers did not dance. They had come because Velantrie gave the word, because he chose to look upon Santa Leandra at her merrymaking, and that was all.

Velantrie did not dance either. There was none whom he knew upon that floor save and except the small girl who called him master, and he only smiled with amusement as he watched her.

But Lolo Sanchez' quick little brain was working and she meant to change that very soon. Therefore she sent the least of her followers, a meek brown Mexican, unnoticeable in the crowd, to whisper something in old Doc Tackert's ear.

Lolo did not dance the next number, the first on her record for the night, though lovers and would-be lovers thronged about her. She waved her tiny hands and shook her shining black head.

"Tired," she said stubbornly, "I rest."

And the admirers laughed.

Lolo tired? Lolo the vital, the indefatigable?

But rest she did while the others glided and pointed heel-and-toe, rested quietly with her small hands folded in her scarlet lap—and never once did she look across toward the door.

And then the music stopped, the crowds drifted to the benches, and Doc Tackert was tuning his fiddle to another key.

He took another sip from the tray, tucked the fiddle in his neck and began abruptly to play—and no one called this number.

Wild, swift, beautiful music it was, Spanish to the core.

It lilted and swung and at regular intervals there came a thrum of the bass that sounded like the stroke of a foot upon the floor. And then,

softly, swiftly, like a leaf before a wind, Lolo Sanchez came drifting down the floor alone. From somewhere as if by magic she had drawn a pair of castanets, and these began to snap and click as her hands rose above her head.

Ah, she was a beautiful thing! Young, slim, small, graceful as a gazelle, her lithe body bent and swayed, whirled and dipped and circled, like a flame in the breeze.

The wide skirt of scarlet and black that hung tight about her slim knees was cunningly plaited, so that, with each dip and swirl, it spread at the bottom like a great inverted blossom, blazingly striped with the striking colours. She had drawn a black lace scarf, fine as a cobweb, from a hidden pocket, and this hung over one shoulder, its other end caught in her fingers with the castanets, a whirling, floating cloud of shadow that played around her little head with magic.

Turning, bending, floating, she came down the open floor dancing in such perfect time that never once did old Doc Tackert have to slur a note to match her, and with each thrum of the bass her tiny foot struck sharp against the boards, like a drum among the strings.

Onlookers ceased to smile and watched in open wonder. This girl was brave and she dared greatly, for only an expert could take a floor away from the crowd and "get away with it." But she got away with it entirely.

"Great jumpin' bobcats!" said a man softly, as

she passed, "that there's *dancin'*, boys, now I'm here to tell you!"

The little ears under the banded hair caught the praise but Lolo did not smile.

She was after bigger game than admiring comment.

Stamp—whirl—bend—hands waving, castanets clicking, she went down the long room, circled its farther end and came drifting up along the other side. Necks were craned, feet drawn back to give her room, for she was dancing close. And then, suddenly it seemed, she was opposite Velantrie where he stood beside the door.

Out to the centre she went as if she spurned the crowd, then swift as a wingéd thing she darted toward him, threw back her little head, smiled straight in his eyes and held out her hands, palms up.

It was a challenge, direct, daring, pretty.

For one second the man hesitated. Then he tossed his broad hat to those behind, sprang forward and caught those outstretched hands.

Lolo's eyes were liquid light as she drew him into the clear, snatched her hands away, tossed them above her head, and began to dance in earnest. The stranger, too, began to dance, and those who watched saw instantly that the girl had made no false choice of partners. He placed a hand on his belted hip, raised the other to touch her clicking fingers now and again, and he, too, swayed and dipped and circled, though in a lesser fashion, to

give background to her brilliance, the subtle and perfect accompaniment to a wonderful performance.

Lolo was a rose in the night, a wind in the twilight, a laugh and a jest and a challenge. Velantrie, the stranger, was a young tree in a storm, a cloud hard blown by winds, and the thunder of his booted heels rolled under the lightning of the castanets.

"Great snakes!" said Perly, softly, "ain't that amazin'?"

He spoke to nobody in particular, but the blond boy who stood beside him cleared his throat as if with an effort and Val Hannon on the other side glanced up. The boy's face was pale as milk and his blue eyes were narrowed to cold points.

Down the room and back again went the two. Lolo was all about Velantrie, coaxing, spurning, challenging, and all the while her little face was full of light that shone for all to see.

If she had made secret love to him in some dusky bower it could have had no more appeal, for Lolo was playing for high stakes herself this time. Little she cared for the watching eyes. In the blue eyes of this man, smiling above her, she longed to see awaken the look that she knew so well, the quick, longing look of the coming lover, and she used her sweetest magic—magic of slumbrous glance, of parted scarlet lips, of gay little head back-tipped. Wilder, swifter, became the music, for Old Doc, artist himself, knew well that she

could not long hold out at that pace, and prepared for the climax. Lolo knew the tune and prepared herself.

As if by artless chance she drew the figure gracefully toward the far side of the floor, directly before the blond boy, and she was utterly irresistible. Butterflies in the breeze, stars that glittered, fires at night—she was all of them, and men's pulses throbbed drunkenly to behold her.

And then, as the music rose to one last sweet keening, she fled straight to Velantrie, sank backward in his reaching arm, and held up her flower face toward him, unmistakable in its intent, its invitation.

Half under her spell the man hesitated a fraction of a second. The perfect action of the steps and the music lost its first beat in that second's wait. Lolo's face glowed deeper—and Velantrie bent.

"By——!" came a choking whisper as the blond boy, grey as ashes and cold, reached to his hip.

There was a flash of metal, a step forward—and in that second Val Hannon beside him dropped a lightning-quick hand on his shoulder and swung him round in action—as she had so often swung her dad. There was an oath, a shot that went wild and landed in Hunnewell's tray on the platform's edge across the room, and Velantrie, arrested halfway to Lolo's siren lips, looked straight past the boy and into the blazing black eyes of the girl who had saved his life.

For one sharp moment the tension held.

Then Velantrie slowly straightened up and Lolo slipped from his arm, forgotten as she had forgotten the blond boy. He stood still, breathing hard, his blue eyes fastened on Val's face, a frown between them.

From all sides men crowded in, pushed between and hustled the boy away, while from that other side of the room Velantrie's followers came like a bolt, solid packed, their faces aflame and keen, their hands on their guns, ready.

"Steady, boys," said Velantrie, "there's nothing wrong."

Then he made one stride to Val, reached out a hand and smiled. It was the brilliant lighting of his face, like fire behind a curtain, that was his chiefest charm.

"I've had many a close call," he said simply, "and have done some sharp tricks to beat them myself, but I never saw a prettier piece of work than that. The quick thought, the quick action—they were like a man, a keen man, used to desperate chances, and I never saw a woman before who could think and act like that. If you knew me," he finished frankly, "perhaps you would not take my hand. But I want to thank you."

Gravely Val looked full into his brilliant eyes. The light and the laughter of the earlier night were gone from her face, why she could not have told to save her life, yet it was not because of the near tragedy, that she knew.

"Yes," she said as simply, "I will take your hand."

And her firm brown fingers closed around his in a strong clasp. The smile died on the man's face and he looked into hers for another long moment.

Then he loosed her hand and turned away.

"I shall not forget," he said.

Instantly his men closed about him, they marched across the floor among the crowd which fell back from them, filed compactly out the door and were gone.

The celebration was over in Santa Leandra. Dim shapes rode through the dust and the cool starlight that presaged the dawn, and the denizens of the rangeland scattered for another year.

In silence mostly the groups drew apart.

Perly took Val to the Hudson House to change into her riding clothes, waited until she appeared, and escorted her to the corrals where Briston had the horses ready and waiting.

As the east brightened dimly they left Santa Leandra and rode out on the open plain.

It was characteristic of the bunch from Paradise that no one spoke of the occurrence in the dance hall.

It was mid-morning when they rode into Paradise, and far off Val shaded her eyes with her hand and searched the familiar place.

"Boys," she said at last, "there's something wrong at home. The riders are all in and hanging

round the corrals. There's dad—he's waiting for us."

There was something wrong at Paradise, indeed.

John Hannon met them at the corner of the great house and his face bore signs of strain. His dark eyes were cold and narrow.

"Dad," said the girl straightly, "what's up?"

"A lot," he answered grimly, "this damn country'll say no more that John Hannon's magic works—that he don't lose no stock."

Val's hands on the pommel suddenly gripped hard.

"What?" she said, "come on. What's happened?"

"Rustlers," he said, "at last. Th' Redstar's gone."

Slowly she slid out of her saddle. Slowly the colour drained from her dusky cheeks, leaving them ashen. She stood for a moment leaning against Redcloud, as if her knees had run to water.

Then she went drunkenly toward the broad stone step and dropped upon it. She covered her face with her hands and sat still as the dead. She did not sob and no tears crept through her shaking fingers. She felt as if a knife had been driven deep into her heart—she could not breathe and her throat ached.

John Hannon stood and watched her, his face working.

"Buck up," he said at last sharply, "are you my daughter?"

"Yes, sir," she answered thickly, "yes—sir."

"Then be a man."

The girl rose unsteadily and turned her grey face toward the house—but every nerve in her was crying with her loss.

She felt the wind keening by her face, the slip and slide of the Red King's massive shoulders under her, heard the long roll of his drumming hoofs. She saw his gentle eyes, felt his satin cheek on hers——

And he was gone—the great king of Paradise was gone—gone to the Border, into the hands of lawless men—perhaps to the possession of that arch bandit whose fame was black upon the land—the Black Rustler himself!

"Oh, Redstar!" she cried inwardly, "Oh, my king of horses! Redstar! Oh, Redstar!"

CHAPTER IX

THE LIGHT OF DAWNING FIRES

PARADISE hummed like a hive of bees. Perly and Siff were all for saddling up and tilting out, twin Galahads, on Redstar's trail, but Briston put a stop to that in his sane and quiet way.

"You ain't noways sure that you could get him, once yuh found him, fer whoever took him knows all about him, you can bet on that, an' ain't a-takin' no chances on losin' him. An' furthermore, he didn't *leave* no trail."

Which last was very true. Neither Redstar nor those who took him had left the faintest trace of their flight, though the theft had been committed from the very heart of Paradise itself, from the small corral behind the big one in which the king was always locked at night.

"Wrapped his feet," said the boss briefly and grimly, "an' tied his nose, mebby, so's he wouldn't make no noise."

"But fer th' love of Pete, John," said Perly, miserably, "where was them worthless *vaqueros,* José an' Arlas an' Miguel? An' where were you?"

The boss looked hard at his rider, but the boy's eyes were only earnest and concerned.

"Th' boys was all here—asleep I suppose, though

José was supposed t' be on guard. That's what a man gets by trustin' his help too damned much."

José, meek and quiet, his dark eyes downcast, passed at that moment and heard the biting words, but his gentle brown face did not change.

"An' as for me," went on John Hannon, "I slept like a log an' never heard a hoof."

When rustlers struck in the cattle country unrest came and hovered over that particular *rancho,* for the gentry of the Border were known to select the best ground for operations, and though with Redstar's taking the best of Paradise was gone, there was yet rich picking in the matchless Red Brood, and every soul at the ranch, it seemed, was strung like a wire from that day on.

There were many days thereafter when Val drooped about the deep rooms like a wilted flower, sick with the first grief of her life. And Belle Hannon became the comforter, the martial staff of courage. The sweet and gentle woman was aflame with anger. All her pride in Hannon supremacy, all her love for the master of Paradise, were outraged and aroused.

"Val," she said to the girl, "I know you are suffering with the loss, that you loved Redstar—but think of your father.

"If you are sick over this what do you think he feels? He who is so proud, who has been set apart like, who has been invincible! While others lost on every side he has been inviolate. None dared to strike at Paradise before. Now the invincibility is

broken. He has been insulted like any common rancher, the thing he prized above all his possessions stolen from his very door! We must be brave for his sake, so don't let him see you fret like this."

And, as always when her mother spoke, Val pulled herself together and tried to obey. But it was a hard pull. For days she could not mount a horse. The levels called to her with a promise of healing in their majestic spaces, but when she thought of Dawnlight or Redcloud or Lightning beneath her in place of the great red king her heart sickened.

But she knew she must conquer the feeling sooner or later, and she began to long for the comforting peace of Refugio and Father Hillairé.

So at last, on a golden day when the little winds were still and soft white clouds floated lazily in the high blue vault, she saddled the gelding and went away.

Down across the plains that rimmed the south, across Arroyo Pecos she went, forded the shallow Antelope, and saw the Mission walls clear in the light.

And every step of the way she thought of Redstar and how he was wont to sail like a hawk along these very levels, the miles as naught to him. Never in his life with them had she known him to tire, not at the heaviest grill John Hannon had ever given him.

And so she rode and thought, and presently her mind went back to Santa Leandra and the races

and the dance. With the dance came once more thought of the flaming dark girl, Lolo, and the blue-eyed stranger with the speaking face where the spirit glowed like light behind a curtain. Many times had she thought of that brilliant glance, of the mouth with the upturned corners. She felt again the close grip of his hand, a soft hand, slim and long, that seemed as vital as a face. Val Hannon remembered the stranger with a peculiar interest and was glad, very glad, that the bullet meant for his tall body had been averted by her hand. And then she rode to the gate of Refugio where Father Hillairé stood, though with so strange a trouble on his face that she forgot her own.

She swung from her saddle to take his hand, searching his features. And then, over his shabby shoulder, she looked once more into the face of the black-haired stranger, for Velantrie stood beside the table in the *padre's* garden.

But Father Hillairé moved between them and drew her eyes to his own.

"My daughter," he whispered, "do not mention loss or trouble here."

Wonderingly Val nodded and followed him in along the wall while Bonifacio took her rein and led her horse away.

Many times in his long life had Father Hillairé stood between two fires, and searched his good heart for the better thing to do. He stood there now as he led Val Hannon to face the man at the table.

What vital things might happen from this hour —what staring truths slip out to unleash tragedy!

He held the girl's hand and looked at the man, and his gentle eyes were deep with trouble.

"My son," he said at last, "this is Val Hannon, the sweetest, purest, truest thing in womanflesh I have ever known, except her mother."

The girl flushed and turned her dark eyes up to him.

"And this, Val," he said, taking the stranger's hand to place her own therein, "is Don Velantrie, stranger to the rangeland, sometime of the Border."

The two young creatures did not smile, for gravity seemed to wait upon their meetings. Instead they looked into each other's eyes with a breathless seeming of intensity, and without volition their hands clasped eagerly.

Father Hillairé, wise in the reading of signs, saw that look of dawning wonder, and his heart contracted.

"We've met before, *padre,*" said Velantrie, quietly, "I am glad to say, for if we hadn't I should not be here this hour."

And he smiled then, straight down at Val, while his two blue eyes studied hers, first one and then the other.

The girl drew her hand away and with a word of excuse passed on into the house to find Josephina.

Velantrie turned and looked after her.

When she was gone from sight he looked at Father Hillairé.

"*Padre,*" he said gravely, "that's why I came to Refugio today—to ask you who she was—for she saved my life at the dance at Santa Leandra."

And he proceeded to tell him of that wild hour and its culmination.

"It was a splendid action," he finished admiringly, "swift and keen and timed to the second. If she were a man she'd be a good rider, a good loser and a good shot."

"She is all three," said the priest, and with a sigh he gazed out across the spreading plains toward the south.

Presently he seemed to come back from the infinitude of that far gaze and smiled at Velantrie, a sad crinkling of his features.

"My son," he said, "she is the flower of the rangeland, glad, wholesome, high-souled, born to peace and the even way of honour and of happiness. I'd lay down this old body of mine to keep sorrow from her sweet heart, tears from her pretty eyes."

Velantrie stirred, fiddled with his hat brim on the table and reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt for a cigarette.

"Her face has haunted me since I first looked up and saw her with her hand on the boy's shoulder and her eyes blazing—haunted me with an odd familiarity, as if somewhere, sometime, I had seen those clean-cut features, those narrowed, lighted

eyes. I have puzzled over it ever since, *padre. Where* have I seen this girl?"

"You have not seen her," said Father Hillairé quickly, "for I have known her from her birth and she has never been beyond Santa Leandra to the north and west, a day's ride south. And you are new to this country. You have never seen her, my son."

Fond as Father Hillairé was of the man before him there was in his voice a subtle note of warning, and Velantrie caught it instantly. His dark face flushed and he rose gracefully and held out his hand.

"I know, *padre,*" he said straightly, "*I* know. It is not for Velantrie—'sometime of the Border'—forsworn to blood—to raise his eyes to such virgin flesh. And he does not. It is like your Church door—forbidden. . . . But sometimes the far sight of it—like the Church door—brings a certain wistfulness."

"Then why not change?" cried the priest eagerly. "It is never too late! The Church, the woman—they both forgive."

But Velantrie shook his black head and his mouth hardened.

"For me it is," he said, "I have set myself a task, as you know, and my life is given to it. Not till I have found and killed——"

But with an exclamation Father Hillairé laid a hand across his lips, for Val Hannon was coming down the sanded walk with Maria's baby on her

shoulder. She made a wondrous picture in her slim youth and her dusky colour, with the soft look of universal motherhood drooping the lashes on her smiling eyes.

The wistful look in the stranger's eyes deepened with a sort of swift sickness and he picked up his hat.

"I'll go," he said gently, but the father shook his head.

"Stay until she leaves," he said desperately, "we've had little speech together."

Not for all the poor treasures of his humble house would Father Hillairé have had Velantrie's whistle cut the quiet air, have seen The Comet come trotting down beneath the hanging trees.

So Velantrie stood and watched while Val came and sat in one of the ancient chairs and put the baby on her knee to play with its rose-leaf fingers and touch with understanding hands its little waxen cheeks.

"It's a beautiful baby, *padre.*" she said, wisely regarding the infant, "a darling bundle of sweetness. But I think with you that Maria is not so well. The cough persists."

"I know," said the father anxiously, "and I have tried all my remedies in vain. She sickens for the sight of that worthless one for whom she has never ceased to mourn."

"If I had hold of him," said Val with sudden swift viciousness, "I'd kill him!"

"My daughter!" said the priest sharply, and the

girl blushed. But Velantrie smiled as he dropped into a chair across the little open space of the sanded walk.

"Suppose," he said in the low voice that was sweet with music, "that some one brought him back sealed, under pain of death, to be good to Maria and the cherub here? Would that please you?"

"More than anything in all this world!" cried Val, impulsively, "except——"

But she broke the speech and glanced at Father Hillairé.

"It would be a holy work," she finished gently, "and I should be very glad."

"Then," said Velantrie, still smiling, "it shall be done. Who is the man, *padre,* and from where did he leave this part of the country?"

"It is only a *peon* from down by Arguenta across the line by the name of Mesos Pecuento, and he melted into the west somewhere. It is a heavy promise you make, my son."

"But one I shall be glad to redeem," answered Velantrie.

Val looked at him with deep eyes that were sweet with a new depth and a sort of wonder. This stranger that she had begun to meet talked quietly of big deeds and was quick as running waters. She thought of his acceptance of Lolo's challenge that night in Santa Leandra and how swiftly he had caught her meaning.

But the light in her face darkened a bit at that

memory and somehow she was not so well pleased with him. There was something about the flaming dark girl that she did not like at all. Her woman's instinct had recoiled from her in passing through the dance—and she had dropped her own red rose in a corner because this unknown girl had worn one like it in the same manner!

So she played with the baby and listened to the quiet talk of the two men and the summer day drowsed toward its close, and the stranger stayed as if he did not mean to leave.

The gold and amethyst began to sift across the rangeland and presently she rose and took the child away to the recesses of the deep house. When she came back she was ready for the saddle, drawing on her fringed gloves, her wide hat on her dark head.

Bonifacio brought Lightning, and Velantrie looked at him with keen eyes. Always this man looked at horses. On the range, in the streets of the scattered towns, everywhere, it was horseflesh for which he searched untiringly. An expression of admiration passed across his speaking face.

"That is a beautiful horse, Miss Hannon," he said, "a swift horse, too, I know."

Val smiled.

"The swiftest in the country," she said proudly, "better than Clendenning's Dollar. Better than all others, except one."

At that slight reference to the lost Redstar her

features clouded—and Father Hillairé felt the sweat start on his flesh.

But she said no more and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, father. I'll come again, soon."

Then she turned and, with an appearance of timidity that sat oddly on Val Hannon, held out the same hand to Velantrie. Again the man took it and again the father saw that unconscious eagerness in both young faces.

When the girl was gone, sailing like a kite in the winds across the reaches of the green plain, he wiped his face and the lines seemed to have been graven a trifle deeper therein, as if he felt a presage of disaster.

Long he sat that night and talked with Velantrie in the shadowed garden, while the stars came out on the velvet sky, and the evening service had been said, and peace reigned in the wide world of the rangeland. Velantrie had smoked and waited while the candles glimmered in the dark interior of the Mission and the voices of the worshippers came faintly through the silence, and he bowed his head instinctively. When the priest had come at last it was to break a reverie in which the face of Val Hannon glowed like a live-coal in the dark and troubled him with its illusive hint of familiarity.

"Where have I seen her?" he asked himself over and over, "sometime—somewhere—I've seen those long dark eyes with the crinkles at the corners—though they were not soft then but hard and bright. Now, where—and when?"

And long after he had left the quiet garden and was riding down the world toward the mystery of the Border, toward his swift and dangerous life, that beautiful face continued to haunt him and Velantrie, careless of women, the reckless, the bitter-hearted toward those who oppressed the helpless, Velantrie who harried the rich and gave to the poor with lavish largess, who was hard to catch and impossible to hold, Velantrie thought deeply of a woman and was glad that he had looked upon her, even from afar.

CHAPTER X

VAL CALLS

JOHN HANNON stood in the deep room where the Indian blankets glowed and held his wife in the bend of his arm. His face was a strange mixture of conflicting emotions. A veritable sickness of parting sat upon it and his dark eyes burned upon Belle's sightless face with such a passion of love as rarely lasts beyond the fires of youth. But there was in it also a fierce eagerness to be gone, as when an eagle teeters on the edge of the escarpment rimming the world and makes ready for swooping flight.

He kissed her again and again and studied the curve of her faded cheek, the curls of soft hair at her temples.

And Belle's expert fingers passed over his features, "reading" his face before departure. When he was gone she would drop in a chair and weep like a schoolgirl, but she sped him now like any Spartan.

"And when, John dear," she asked anxiously, "will you be back this time? Will it be as long a trip as the last one?"

The man raised his eagle's head and looked out through the window across the plains. What vis-

ions he saw none might know, but his eyes deepened and glowed and he smoothed her hair absently.

Presently he came back to the moment.

"No," he answered brusquely, "not so long this time."

Then he kissed her again, motioned to Val to come and take her with an imperious nod of his head, put her gently in the girl's arms and was gone. The two women stood so for a long time, listening to his going, the sharp quick orders to this and that one of the servants gathered round in the *patio,* the last instructions to Briston, the ring of Lightning's hoofs on the stones, then the long-roll of the gallop that took the Boss of Paradise away into the outer world of which they knew so little. Then Belle groped for the chair, laid her head on the near table among the books, and had it out with herself, while Val stood by helpless to give her comfort.

Why, she wondered with a frown, must her dad make these many trips, long trips and far apart, coming, maybe once a year and lasting from two to five weeks? He had made them ever since she could remember, and he had always looked so at parting, always her mother had wept.

Oh, well—Belle would be all right in a few days, would be looking forward to his return, planning little surprises for him, new arrangements of the worn furniture, little new touches of curtains and flowers in earthen jars. And then there was much to think of beside,—the new litter of puppies under

the third barn floor, the string of horses Perly and Siff were going to break—and she wondered much about the stranger with the speaking face, and if it was true that he could, as he promised, bring back the man whom Maria loved.

Paradise settled into a sort of pleasant lethargy after the departure of the master. The riders were out from dawn to dark and the women in the kitchens cooked savoury dishes that scented the drowsy air, while a high sun sailed in a cloudless sky, and the voice of Bluewater sang softly in the stillness with a million subtle notes. Belle Hannon was already speaking of the time when her husband should return, and Val spent many hours rocking lazily in the gay-fringed hammocks. She was her old self again in sweetness, in her eager care for all the creatures of the household and the ranch, but deep down in her heart she did not cease to mourn for the vanished Redstar. If her eyes swept down the long green field where he was wont to graze, she saw again his regal form. Sometimes at sundown she would cup her hands to her lips and, giving the two keen, long-drawn whistled notes, listen wistfully as if from somewhere in the far fringes of the Blind Trail Hills she must catch the fine faint echo of his ringing answer.

But always the vast silence of the illimitable land was unbroken, and Briston coming in from the dust and drouth of a long day's ride would look at her pityingly. He who had been so long at Paradise, who had seen the girl grow up and knew the depths

of her loving heart, knew now how deep and aching was her grief for the gallant horse.

"Val, girl," he said to her one night sitting idly in the *patio* where she swung beside the spring, "there is an old saying among the Spaniards which means 'a nail drives out a nail.' The only way for you to ease your hurt at Redstar's loss is to love another horse. If you'll buck up an' quit that callin' at th' twilight—it gives me th' creeps, Val—I'll make a trip out when John gets back an' bring you th' best an' fastest horse that money can buy."

Val reached out a hand and laid it on the foreman's arm.

She did not know that the steady pulse along that arm missed one stroke, then went on again at its accustomed pace.

"Tom," she said tenderly, "you'd go to Purgatory for me if need was. I know that. And I love you for the understanding that is in your heart—a real he-man's heart, strong and tender and kindly—and if it would work, I'd say go. But it won't work, Tom dear. You might bring all the grand horses in the world and line them up before me—but I'd still be searching for the keen red face, the soft and gentle eyes. Redstar isn't a horse alone—he's an entity, an individual, a lover and a friend. Do you think any one could bring me another Tom Briston and say, 'Give him your affection'? No. As there could never be another friend to take your place, so there could never be another Redstar."

The man was quiet for a time while the big stars twinkled in the dusky sky and the tiny piping of insects made a small music in the night. He smoked and flipped the ashes from his cigarette.

"Well," he said presently, "stop that callin', for th' love of Pete."

But Val shook her head against the hammock.

"I can't, Tom," she said miserably, "it's just as if I heard the Redstar calling—calling—calling, somewhere when the sun goes down and I've got to answer. It's in me here," she put a quick hand against her heart, "and must come out. I've got a strange feeling that he's penned and holden somewhere, and that he's breaking his gallant heart for me, even as I grieve for him."

"Why, Val," said Briston, "he's only a horse. More like he's eatin' good red oats somewhere, all blanketed an' cared for like a prince—for whoever took him knows his worth."

At that the girl sat up and swift anger flushed her cheeks, set her eyes to sparkling bodefully.

"That picture makes me wild!" she cried, "if I could see the thief this minute I'd shoot him dead in his tracks and never turn a hair! I'm all Hannon when my own is touched."

Never again did the foreman try to offer her comfort.

She went about as usual and to all outward purposes had regained her gay spirits—but when she called at dusk Briston knew what was in her heart

of grief and uneasiness and savage hatred of the unknown thief.

The days passed and the master had been gone a fortnight when one day Boyce Clendenning rode in on Dollar.

Val, seeing him from afar, met him in the *patio* with smiles, all freshly clad in a starched print dress. She thought, like Perly, that this handsome and successful man was overly confident in his quiet way, and her father's outspoken preference for him was in a way against him—for what girl ever finds entirely right the man she thinks her father favours for her hand?—and yet in honest fairness she must accord him respect. She did not dislike him, either, when it came down to cases, for Boyce Clendenning was very much a man in a land where men must be all of that to prosper.

"Hello, Boyce," she greeted him, laying an admiring hand on Dollar's silver shoulder, "this is a treat—you coming so far to see us. Or were you going by?"

"Hardly," said the man, swinging down to take off his hat and extend his hand, "I came because I wanted to."

He certainly was a handsome chap, and no mistake, thought Val. Thick blond hair waved up and back from a keen and open face where the "smartest" eyes she had ever seen smiled directly into hers. If this man told one he'd put a dime on a stone at the world's rim on a certain date, Val felt that one could go there in all confidence, and

the coin would be where he had promised. That was her inner way of cataloguing him.

And yet, there was lacking something to make him rise above the level of handsome men in general—she didn't quite know what it was. Perhaps—ah—it was that his hair was not black, now—that his eyes, though blue as the summer heavens, were not full of sparkle—that his face did not shine with reckless spirit, like light behind a curtain.

Already, Val Hannon, innocently and unconsciously, was comparing men to the mysterious stranger whom Father Hillairé had not deigned to explain further than as "Velantrie, sometime of the Border."

Velantrie—the wind, the storm, the lightning, the summer rain and the sunlight—the quick, the gentle—all these had Val read into his speaking face, and she was right.

As she led Clendenning into the depths of the cool old room Belle Hannon rose with the manner of a duchess and smiled toward the sound of their approach. The man had heard of John Hannon's blind wife—who in the rangeland had not?—but he had never seen her. Now he looked at the delicate beauty of her face, its quick, receptive intelligence, its high mark of character, and knew why her daughter was as far above the other girls of the country as the clouds above the grass.

He took Belle's hands, both of them, with a sudden pleasant liking which communicated itself in-

stantly to the vibrant brain behind the hands, and the two were friends at once.

"This is Boyce Clendenning, Belle," said Val, and the man felt a strange surprise at the girl's use of her mother's first name. He was to learn that that was one of their playful intimacies which made the friendship of this mother and daughter so rare and so perfect.

"I know," said Mrs. Hannon, "you are the man John Hannon likes above all others among the ranchers, therefore you are good and worthy of regard. I shall like you, too."

Clendenning laughed, tossed his hat away and sat down to a long and comfortable visit.

He talked of books and music and the blind woman glowed like a candle under frosted glass, for she greatly loved these things. Shut forever in the circle of her dusky rooms her fine mind had closed around these magic gifts to the world at large and she had found them good and satisfying. Her husband had always brought her books when he came back from the outside places and it had been Val's pleasure and duty to read them to her.

So Clendenning found her a pleasant field of thought and introspection, touched with a lightsome humour. She played her nameless tunes for him and he listened in content, his quiet eyes on her daughter's face.

But finally the conversation drifted, as all speech must in the rangeland, to cattle and finally to rustlers.

"I suppose you've heard that the Flying Y's had trouble?" he asked idly.

"No," said Val at once. "What?"

"Lost eighty head of fat steers ready for the driving."

"Good gracious! How?"

"Rustlers again. Drove them through the Needle's Eye into the Blind Trails. Trail was broad as daylight up to the face of the cliff, then of course it narrowed and was lost on the rock, for the pass into the hills is so narrow that only two steers can enter at the same time. The owners trailed their cattle there—to face two rifles sticking out on either side of the pass, a perfect guard. No man's fool enough to deliberately give his life for a bunch of steers, so they went quietly back to the ranch. But the country's buzzing, you bet, and I'm with it heart and soul. I tell you something's got to be done to discourage these open raids, or we cattlemen might as well give up the game. There's little enough profit for the year's work as it is, and when that is lifted by a bunch of thieves it takes the heart out of us."

Val's dark eyes flashed, for she thought of her own loss, word of which had been noised about the country.

"I'm with you, too," she said bitterly, "heart and soul. If the ranchers ride on the rustlers' trail I want to go along. I'd like to kill the man that took the Redstar."

"It's coming, sooner or later, that ride," an-

swered Clendenning. "It must come, or we lay down our hands, beaten. I've been talking to the Attison boys and Quinlan and they all favour organization and short shrift for the victims we may catch with the goods. It looks like the work of the Black Rustler, that clever lifter whom none meet and but few have ever glimpsed—the smooth, silent chap who works like a machine, with neatness and precision, and rides the fastest horse ever seen in these parts. There are some wonderful stories afloat about that horse—a great bay horse, tall and high-withered, seventeen hands they say, and so fast that those who have caught a far glimpse of him say it runs like a super-horse. There is one yarn on the Border that says a posse had the Black Rustler in sight once for seven hours, that its horses, the pick of that part of the country, dropped out one by one, and that at the last the Black Rustler, rising in his stirrups, waved a hand above his head and ran away from the jaded bunch so fast that they could not believe their eyes. It must be some horse, that. I'd like to see it."

As he talked Val Hannon's eyes became wide, dark pools of retrospection.

"My land!" she said softly, "I believe I've seen that horse—from the top of Mesa Grande one day at sundown. I had ridden the Redstar up and was sitting on the rim, looking across the ranges, when a band of men came out of the north up Santa Leandra way, and one did ride a wonderful horse—a long red horse that lay down and ran

for all the world like Redstar himself! And the rider rose in his stirrups and waved his hat to me!"

"Did he wear a black mask?" asked Clendenning, quickly.

"Why, I couldn't say. He was far and away too far off for me to see his face. I only got the general outline and colour—and that mighty seeming of speed."

"It might have been. There is a whisper about that he has been in Santa Leandra several times, but nobody cares to question the Black Rustler. Well, I think we'll question him some day—at the end of a rope. It will be a man-size job, all right, for he is both painstaking and thorough in his methods. The owners of the Flying Y went back to the pass two days later—but they came away again, for there were still two rifles guarding the gate into the hills."

"It's too bad John isn't here," said Belle Hannon, "for he'd be with you, I know. He stands for right and order squarely and he's sore, sore with the loss of Redstar."

"That is enough to make any one sore," said Clendenning, gracefully, "for the Redstar, I'm sorry to say as Dollar's master, is the best horse this country ever saw. I know this, though I've never seen him matched. But if Lightning could beat Dollar, I know that the King of Hannon's Red Brood is matchless."

An hour later he took his leave and the two

women sped him from the *patio* where the sweet spring talked in the stillness.

"Val," said Belle Hannon, quietly, "I'm with your dad. I favour Boyce Clendenning. He is honest, straight and of fixed purpose. If he sets out to catch the Black Rustler, he'll get him sooner or later. If he promises to love, cherish and protect a woman, he'll do so till he dies."

And she did not know with what utter prophecy she spoke.

Val laughed, a ringing peal, and shook her shoulder playfully.

"John Hannon had better be getting back," she said lightly, "or his wife'll be falling in love with his best friend."

The riders were coming in with rattle of spur and bit chain, the red veils were beginning to sift down from the blue infinitude above, and the long twilight would soon be falling over Paradise.

Val, standing alone in the *patio* after Belle had gone indoors, looked down across the empty fields, for the Red Brood grazed no more without a guard, and a sigh lifted her slim breast. She felt the desire that came with eventide to cup her hands to her lips and send out on the quiet air the two long notes that were wont to bring the king sailing to her up the long levels. She tried to stifle it, to hold it down, but it would not be denied. It seemed to her that she could hear the Redstar, faint and far away, calling, calling from the east. Always from

the east where the Blind Trail Hills rose into the turquoise sky.

She threw back her head and answered, high and shrill, and Briston, riding down from the north, heard that call and shivered.

CHAPTER XI

THE LURE OF THE PADRE'S GARDEN

THERE was a time after Clendenning's visit when nothing happened to stir the quiet life at the ranch. Val talked with the riders about the trouble at the Flying Y and Briston had little to say.

In fact there was an unostentatious reticence in their speech about the whole affair. She did not know that every man-jack of them had been filled with a vague dismay over the incident of the dance hall at Santa Leandra, nor that they had listened to faint whispers concerning the armed strangers.

"Holy smoke!" said Perly the loquacious, "if that there Velantrie *was* th' Black Rustler an' our Val saved his rotten hide, her name'll be all over this country an' I see where this bunch'll do a lot of fightin'."

"Don't get excited," counselled Briston, "there's a lot o' men ridin' these ranges, comin' an' goin', an' there ain't nothin' beyond ordinary t' fix that name to Velantrie that I can see. True, he's got a bunch of men with him, an' I'll say that some of them don't look like no mama's angel children, but that ain't here nor there. Th' Border's restless an' there's many a bunch ridin' on its own affairs. Let's keep our shirts on.'"

But nevertheless when next he rode to the distant railroad shanty-town he heard the tale of the Santa Leandra affair, garbled out of all semblance to the truth, and, true to Perly's prophecy, he, Briston, the coolest of all the riders at Paradise, had "one peach of a fracas" with a stranger from the south in the Silvershine Saloon.

Val heard nothing of this, for the boys kept it from her carefully, and Father Hillairé, who had all the gossip of the rangeland brought to his hospitable doors, kept it securely in his wise old head.

John Hannon did not return as soon as they had expected him, and time dragged a little. Val rode to the Mission many times, but never again did she encounter a tall stranger in the dry garden, and though she drew the talk artlessly to this stranger a time or two, Father Hillairé was non-communicative and she learned no more about him.

She helped the boys with the breaking of the new string of horses, for John Hannon's daughter was better than a lot of men at that, and her dusky skin burned a tawnier shade in the sun, while her cheeks were like roses in the sunset. She played her games in the *patio* with the shrieking brown babies and read to Belle the new books that Boyce Clendenning sent. But sometimes she would stop and look away toward the south whence had come the man with the vital eyes, and see again his smiling face in Father Hillairé's garden.

"I wonder," thought the girl pensively, "why he

don't seem like any one else I ever saw. He—he's different, somehow."

The boss had been gone five weeks. August was blazing on the rangeland. The heavens were high and hard with heat and the sun shone continually. But always at dusk there came out of the south the little cool wind that whispered along the levels, and the marvellous colours sifted down from infinitude.

And then one day, Val, riding aimlessly far down Arroyo Pecos way, came up from the cool shade of the ford on Little Antelope, and face to face with two men—Velantrie on a big white horse and a slim dark Mexican with a sullen face.

Instantly Velantrie's face lighted with the smile she had not forgotten, and his broad hat came off with a graceful sweep

"Miss Hannon!" he cried, and it was well for Father Hillairé's peace of mind that he could not see the look of sudden joy that flashed between them.

"Mr. Velantrie!" mimicked the girl with a laugh, "it's been long since we met in the *padre's* garden."

"Has it?" said the man eagerly and simply, and Val blushed.

"Hasn't it?" she asked honestly.

"Lord—yes," said Velantrie, softly.

For a moment they were silent, looking at each other with the age-old wonder that comes once in every life. Then the man thought quickly and

sharply of the Church door—and the woman—and became on the instant the indifferent, smiling stranger.

Val saw the change and became grave herself.

Velantrie turned to the rider beside him, a slim, good-looking youth, scarce more than a boy, and waved an eloquent hand.

"Let me present Señor Mesos Pecuento," he said gently, "of down Arguenta way, bound for the Mission to work for Father Hillairé and, incidentally, for wedlock in the chapel."

Val Hannon blushed again, but the look she flashed Velantrie was eloquent of gratitude and gladness and admiration for so successful a quest.

They spoke for a few moments more, but the spontaneity was gone from their meeting, and presently the strangers rode into the Antelope to emerge to the sight of the distant Mission gleaming palely in the light, while Val Hannon touched Redcloud and went on toward the south.

Velantrie, strong on the bit of his own desires, went straight to his destination, but somehow this day he had little taste for discourse with his friend of cassock and rosary, and his stay in the garden was short—barely long enough to see Maria fling herself and the baby into the boy's arms—which opened eagerly enough when he beheld the two—and to grip the priest's hand.

"Stay, my son," said Father Hillairé earnestly, "you are a bringer of joy. Stay a while and share it."

But the other shook his head.

"I think, *padre,*" he said, "that I shall come but little more to this country. Perhaps no more."

The old man looked at him keenly.

"Why?" he asked simply.

"Because it is not well that I should."

Father Hillairé sighed.

"No," he said sadly, "it is not well."

Velantrie fiddled with his hat brim.

"You know the speech we had one day—concerning—ah—the Church door?"

"I know."

"It draws, *padre,*" said the man gently, "it and —the things it stands for. I'll be better away."

Father Hillairé's old eyes went dim with a sudden mist. He felt for a tragic second the uselessness of all human effort, the pity of the human heart, erring and lost, groping without the light, bound to its fleshpots—be they sin or love or vengeful vows—and refusing all the good that comes with salvation.

Then the martial spirit that had glorified his life in this far wilderness rose up in him again and he laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"My son," he said, "wherever you are you cannot escape my prayers. Sooner or later you will come back—to the Church door."

But Velantrie laughed and seemed to fling away the pensiveness like a garment with which he was done.

"Perhaps," he said recklessly, "when I have ful-

filled my destiny. Will you take me in then—red-handed?"

"Aye," said Father Hillairé tensely with martial eyes, "the Christ and I."

"My God!" said Velantrie, sober once more, "no wonder we poor riff-raff love you—the refugees and I—the outcasts and the sinners! You'd drag us all to Heaven by your cassock's fringes, cleansed by the surplus of your goodness! Forgive me, *padre.*"

And he shook his hand and mounted.

"This white's a good horse," he said, "but I miss The Comet—laid up with a sprained tendon. I had a wild ride a little time ago, father—a wild ride even for Velantrie—and there's another *ranchero* down by Moreno cursing my name. Also, there's a poor *peon* a hundred miles away who has a roof over his head and a little band of sheep. But The Comet paid. He'll be all right again, but I'll rest him up good."

Then he swung into the saddle, once more wrung the priest's hand and was gone.

He rode straight back the way he had come and he was deep in thought as he neared the fringes of the Little Antelope. Thought that concerned Val Hannon. Velantrie had known many women, but none of them had come into his life for more than a fleeting touch. He was, as he had told Father Hillairé, a man who mastered himself. He had ridden away from much that a weaker man would have stayed for.

Women—the kind he could know, why, they were only a delusion and a snare. They played small part in his scheme of things. To the few good ones he might have known he had steeled his heart, because he had no place in his sort of life for them. But this girl, this sweet, keen, dark-eyed girl—why, there was something about her that made him want to stretch out a timid hand and touch the farthest ruffle of her dress, that made him feel like the dust under her feet. No. Velantrie—"sometime of the Border"—Lord, how that had stuck in his mind like a bitter barb!—Velantrie must not think of this particular one at all.

Therefore he struck the big white horse with a heel and rode through the shallow water—and there, coming slowly along, slouched gracefully in her saddle, as if she idled on a way she was used to making at speed, was the girl herself. Val Hannon for the first time in her life deliberately waiting to cross trails with a man, and as unconscious of the fact as any child!

At the fringe of the little stream they met face to face again, and the shadow of the poplars played over their young faces where the eager light leaped helplessly.

They drew up by common consent and sat still for a moment smiling at each other like two children—Val, the pride of Paradise, and Velantrie, "sometime of the Border!"

"I want to thank you," said the girl simply at last, "you have brought life to Maria, I know."

"And pleasure to myself," answered the man, "for it has given me great pleasure to do your will. It is a gentle will and kindly."

"Father Hillairé, too, will be full of joy over the erring sheep brought back to his fold, for he had grieved with and over Maria a deal. Where did you find Mesos?"

"Not far from his native heath. He was hiding among the *jacals*. It was no great thing to find him."

"But how did you make him come?" asked the girl wonderingly.

Velantrie smiled.

He did not tell her that among the poor Mexicans across the line the name of Velantrie was magic, that in many an humble hut it bore a sound of "deliverer," that it carried hope as well as fear, and that its owner had merely to speak and his words, running afar among the *peons*, were like *riatas* creeping on the ground to bring back the thing they sought.

"Oh," he said, "I told him it would be—better for his health if he came along quietly."

"Gun-man?" asked Val, laughing.

Instantly Velantrie sobered.

"Not exactly," he said, in his slow soft speech, "though I might be on occasion."

"Yes," said Val, "I know. I might be, too. My dad is."

"Two-gun?" asked Velantrie with interest.

"No, one," she answered proudly, "the best and

quickest shot in this country. When rustlers drive from this range they leave Paradise alone. That is, until lately."

Velantrie looked at the brown hand on her pommel.

"Yes," he said, "I think you might be, also. Are you like your dad?"

"Chip off the old block. Look like him, think like him, act like him."

"Then he's a mighty quick man, decided and strong," said Velantrie, admiringly.

"You're dead right he is," said Val, warmly, "John Hannon's the best and biggest man, all ways, in these parts."

"Like him a lot, I take it?" and the speaker smiled while his blue eyes searched her features.

"I sure do, and so does Belle. That's my mother," she explained, "and they're all bound up in each other."

Never in her life before had she told a stranger, or any one else, so much about the sheltered life at Paradise.

A little silence fell between them and the girl looked off across the stretches to the south, while the man looked at her.

The curve of her cheek was lovely as a cloud at sunset, as soft and tinged with red-gold. The soft dark hair that kissed her temple was full of moving curls. The lashes fringing her long dark eyes were thick as rushes by a watered place—and she was so sweet that for once in his life the man beholding

marvelled at womanly perfection. And she was good. Lord, Lord!—how pure and wholesome was that keen and open face—how far a cry from those women he had known! This was the girl he had dreamed of in those far-off days of his youth, before —not so far off either by actual count, only four or five years at best, but it seemed to him that a long life had intervened—a long, long life of fights and swift getaways, of desperate chances and wild rides in the dark—since the black day that had seen the life go out of a man's eyes and which had made him —"Velantrie of the Border."

He sighed unconsciously and Val turned quickly.

"What?" she said, and he flushed with pleasure at the quick understanding.

"Not a thing on earth," he answered lightly.

Then they fell to talking of the cattle country and the long dry spell, and Val told him that the springs were holding out pretty well, and that her father hoped to drive early and get the best from the stock he could. And the sun went swiftly down the heavens and the purple veils began to weave their magic on the stretches, while they sat beside the Little Antelope and forgot that Time was, after the manner of youth since the world began.

"My gracious!" said Val at last, startled, "it's getting late! I'll have to run for it now!"

"Looks like you could do it on this horse," said Velantrie, admiringly, "I wish I had my own mount here. I'd like you to see The Comet."

"What's he like?"

"I couldn't describe him. You'd have to see him to know."

"I could say the same," said Val, quickly, "for I said that rustlers never struck at Paradise—until lately. They took the greatest horse that ever ran these plains a short time back—and I'd kill the man who did it like I would a snake!"

"Rustlers?"

"Yes—they say the Black Rustler himself has been seen in Santa Leandra this summer, and I make no doubt it was he who lifted Redstar."

"Redstar," mused Velantrie, "You call him Redstar?"

"Yes."

"And mine's The Comet. That's a coincidence, isn't it? Both meaning light—the heavens—a star."

"Why, so they do!" cried Val, "and from our own words they are both great horses. What colour is this Comet?"

"Deep blood bay."

"With a smoky black cloud across his shoulders, and dim black dapples shining through?"

The smile faded slowly from the man's face.

"A perfect description," he said, "have you seen The Comet at Father Hillairé's when I was there?"

She shook her head.

"No. I'm telling you of Redstar."

"Well, you might be telling of the other."

"Can he run?" persisted Val.

"Four years back," said Velantrie, "he was

within two seconds of the world's record at New Orleans—he and another."

"Ties?"

"Ties—and blood brothers."

"I know," cried Val, "for we have a pair like that—Firebrand and The Flame. We own the Red Brood, you know, and Redstar was its king."

"Have you had him long?"

"I grew up on him," said the girl simply, and thought she spoke the truth, for it had seemed far back in her short life, that day in spring when the Boss of Paradise had ridden the red king in.

Velantrie, who had straightened up in his saddle, relaxed again and drew a deep breath of something like relief.

He gathered the reins on the white horse's neck. Val noticed the slim grace of his long fingers. What was there about this man that she did not notice?—the brilliance of his eyes, the shape of his fine forehead, the sweetness of the lips with the upturned corners. She looked at him with all the dawning light of an awakening in her clear eyes, and did not know it was there for all to see. Velantrie, wise to womenkind instinctively, caught something of its radiance and a cold chill went down to his heart. He actually shuddered in the warm air and his mouth drew into the close hard line that was known afar across the Border.

"Wouldn't that be hell!" he thought swiftly with a feeling of sickness at the pit of his stomach, "just hell!"

The look, the light in her innocent face, flashed before him a forecast of what might have been under a happier star. But he had nothing in kind with innocence, with the happiness that comes from a clean and honest love—not Velantrie with his gay and reckless record, his pledged future—a future wherein there stood, like a black cross on a blood-red sky, an oath of vengeance to be redeemed, and then—the inevitable end.

These things he thought, his brooding eyes upon his pommel. No. This wondrous woman-creature before him with the light faintly showing in her dusky eyes must have no part or parcel in the life she had saved that night at Hunnewell's.

Then he looked up—and encountered those sweet eyes, deep as evening stars, as pure, saw the red mouth parted in unconscious beauty, for the girl sat leaning a little forward drinking in his features as one drinks unconsciously the wonder of the sunset.

Velantrie caught his breath sharply. He drew the rein and the white horse leaped, ready for instant flight. The man had meant to ride from her without a backward look. All his life he had mastered himself. He would do it now and kill by one brutal action the divine thing he saw opening its eyes to life in the innocent heart of this girl. He would—

But the strong hand on the rein wavered for once, the purpose in his mind flickered like a flame in wind—and he turned his glance across his shoul-

der. Val had not moved, but the deep eyes had changed a mere breath, as if a wind touched water with troubling fingers. Fear was there, far back, just lifting its head, fear of loss—and the man saw it.

"Damn!" he said under his breath.

He brought the horse down to quiet.

"Miss Hannon," he said, meaning still to end this new thing here and now, "Miss Hannon——"

"Yes?" said Val, obediently.

Velantrie swept off his hat and the sweat had started on his forehead.

"This is my last visit to the rangeland," he said desperately, "I'm leaving this part of the country."

Then did the fear leap out, full-panoplied.

"Why?" breathed Val, straightforwardly.

"Because I must."

"Why?" she asked again.

"Why?—well—perhaps I'm needed down yonder," and he waved an arm toward the distant south.

Val's fingers tightened on the saddle horn.

"Perhaps you're needed here, too," she said simply, "you seem, somehow, to belong here. I—somehow—I like to meet you in the *padre's* garden, to hear you speak."

Poor Val! Many another woman had liked to hear Velantrie speak, for there was that in this man's gentle voice which touched the heart of women—the soft kindliness that made friends for him among dogs and children, which sounded like

bells of doom sometimes to those who harmed the weak. It had been such a time or two.

There was reason—down across the Border—to call him Don Quixote Velantrie, good reason.

The man shook his head.

"No," he said, "it is best that I don't ride this way again. Sometime ask Father Hillairé—he'll tell you why."

All the light was gone from the girl's face, a faint paleness come instead. This man, this tall stranger with the vital eyes—this youth she had known so short a time—he would ride away today and she would never see him again. Suddenly it seemed to her that it could not be—it could not possibly be. She must see him again. Why, it seemed ages since that sharp moment in Santa Leandra when she had looked past the blond boy with the smoking gun in his hand, and straight into this man's eyes. All her life the daughter of Paradise had had what she desired.

Now she reached out a hand, a simple action, as one man to another, and laid it on his upon the pommel.

"No," she said straightly, "don't go and come no more. We are just getting to be friends. I don't want you to go."

Velantrie caught the honest hand in a clasp that would have hurt an indoor woman, but Val Hannon returned it closely.

For a tense moment they sat so, looking deep into each other's eyes.

"It is wrong," said the man at last, "I have no right to be friends with a girl like you. Not that my heart is wrong toward women—*that*, at least, I can deny with honesty—but I am black with other sins, Miss Hannon—sins among men."

Val's look did not change.

"So are lots of men I know," she said simply, "this country is full of such. But a man's heart can be made over."

"Lord! Lord!" said Velantrie, "I see the *padre's* life-work.

"You, like the good priest, would raise the sinner on your very heart! But in my case it cannot be. There is a reason why Velantrie—'sometime of the Border'—cannot change. Don't trouble about me. I am well and at peace with myself."

Gently he laid down the hand he had held so tightly clasped in his.

"But I thank my stars, Miss Hannon, for—that night at Hunnewell's. I told you then I should not forget. There are some things that are part and parcel of one's life upon an instant. That moment there was one. If I go I shall not forget."

"But you won't go," said Val, "not to stay. You —will come back—sometimes—to the *padre's* garden?"

Earnest, honest, simple as a child she leaned forward and searched his features—and the man's heart leaped, thundered at his temples, set a sudden tremble in his lips. His blue eyes grew soft and luminous as summer lights in windows.

"My God!" he whispered softly, "you and this Father Hillairé!"

Val leaned nearer yet, her hand reaching out unconsciously.

"You will come—sometimes?"

"Yes," said Velantrie, thickly, "sometimes—to the *padre's* garden. There can be no wrong in looking at your face in the shadow of the Mission walls —though God forgive me that I think of either! Yes—I will come back."

And with a quick and graceful motion, as if without volition, he bent low from his saddle and kissed that reaching hand.

Then he whirled his horse and was gone toward the south—and Val Hannon ran Redcloud all the way to Paradise, while the purple veils draped all the spaces of the open country and the *mesas* stood like ancient ghosts.

There was a wonder on the world, indeed; the evening stars sang together in the heavens and her face was bright with ecstasy like the clouds that fringed the sunset.

CHAPTER XII

THE CRY IN THE BLIND TRAIL HILLS

RIMMING the world of the rangeland at the east the Blind Trail Hills rose stark into the heavens, their western face a band of rugged cliffs that shut them in completely. The pass, a narrow gateway cut by nature down the sharp escarpment, let into their great stone fastnesses those who cared for any reason to thread their lonely ways. Mysterious, unbelievably rugged, these hills spread away to east and north in uncounted miles of peak and cliff and hidden vale. Sweet streams watered them, falling with soft music down their worn and broken faces, while here and there small glades between the cliffs glowed green with forage and were starred with flowers.

Far back and to the left, lost in a maze of gulches, peaks and cañons, there lay between the circling walls a tiny valley, fair as the fields of Paradise. Blind cliffs walled it entirely, coming abruptly down to another natural gateway, like the outside pass. An emerald carpet clothed its level floor with verdure, broad trees grew here and there, while far at the northern end a deep spring of sweet water lay like a tiny lake amid its fringing flags.

It looked like a bit of Eden set down in this prosaic world, innocent of man. But man had found

it out and left his mark—the solid gate of five slim saplings set square across the mouth, their ends let into the living rock itself where fitted slots had been cut with some sharp instrument. These saplings were strong, straight, and trimmed. A neat and thorough hand had done the job. They rose in the pass to a height of some six feet and closed the glade completely.

They had a sinister look, there in the solitude between the hiding hills, as if they made of the lovely glade a prison.

And what was this? A ragged fringe of gnawed and shining fibre clothing the two top ones from end to end as with a garment!

And what was that rimming the green floor on all sides? A narrow trampled path worn to the dusty earth beneath the grass by running feet that circled tirelessly the binding walls in an endless search for freedom!

And what wondrous thing stood yonder, picked boldly out in the green floor as the long red veils of the early twilight came waving down the rocks?

A horse—a great red horse, monster tall, marvellously slim, his red satin hide glowing in the light, the mane on his arching neck a flowing cloud, the black tail sweeping to his heels a sable plume, his shoulders dusky with a darker shadow where the dim black dapples shone! His great head was high, beyond the reach of most men, his small ears were pointed sharply toward the narrow gateway beyond which lay freedom and all he loved, his soft

and gentle eyes were sick with longing, while the delicate nostrils that quivered with each breath were pinched a bit, for the kingly heart beneath the broad bay breast was fretting itself away.

And as the twilight fell Redstar the beautiful, Redstar the swift, the tender-eyed, the loving, threw up his head and sent a piercing cry ringing down the cañons.

He stood like a rock and listened, his nostrils still, the breath held in his sides, while the echoes took it up and made a million voices of it.

When the last faint note had died away he called again, and again he listened, his eager eyes straining into the distance down the narrow defile. Until the last red veil had changed to blue and then to black on the darkening face of the wall, he sent his cry ringing in the dusk, held his breath and listened, pointed his ears and spread his thin nostrils for sound or scent of answer.

Alas! Alas!

He was far and bye from the homing fields of Paradise, beyond all sound to carry across the deadening miles, and of all the friends who loved him there was but one heart that quivered to that silent call, and it groped in the dull mazes of human misunderstanding.

CHAPTER XIII

DEEP WATERS

AT Paradise the riders came in and sat down at the long tables in the dining-room. They were brown as Indians with the summer's work but they were neat to a man, their faces shining with much good soap and water, their hair smooth with the ministrations of the combs hanging to their chains beside the looking glasses in the back veranda. It was evening and the day was done, and they were full of jest and laughter, amiable with the pleasure of work accomplished, a pleasant place to lounge in.

Of all the merry crew Perly alone was missing, beside José and Rosy out with the herd on the upper range.

Perly had been to Santa Leandra and even now they could hear him unsaddling in the far corral, for any one could hear Perly from any reasonable distance.

"That boy," said Val, smiling from the table's head where she sat in John Hannon's absence, "could wake the dead."

"Right you are, Val," said Dirk, "I've seen him wake a town that was ready for burial. Ain't you, Tom?"

"Well, he ain't to say a dead one himself," an-

swered the foreman, "but I like his style. Perly's worth a dozen fellers I could blow smoke on," and he caught the brown fist that rose on either side in good-natured threat, for there was an affectionate camaraderie between the foreman of Paradise and his riders.

And at that moment Perly himself came breezing in, his face unwashed, his hair sweated on his forehead, the broad leather flags of his worn chaps waving. He stopped in the doorway and looked at them excitedly.

"Boys," he said, "what you think? Th' men from th' Flying Y went back to th' pass—an' they found them guns still stickin' out—two weeks after th' raid! They went in—an' them there guns was blind, propped up on rocks, and reachin' out along one was th' arm of an old coat stuffed with grass! That there drive was a one- or two-man trick, an' it was th' Black Rustler that done it."

"Th' hell you say!"

"Sure do. An' ain't th' Flyin' Y boys wild! Eighty head o' steers ready fer drivin'—and a two-man trick—an' them comin' back from th' pass like a lot of ninnies scared out by a lay like that!"

"But they didn't know, Perly," said Briston. "How'd they know them guns was blind? An' the Black Rustler ain't to be fooled with. He's killed too many men along this Border. You know his fame as a gun-man."

"Well, somethin's goin' to be done this time, or I miss my guess. Boyce Clendenning's ribbin' up

a plan for a ride, an' when that comes off I think he'll have his man."

"That's a man-size trick," said Briston, "ain't no one along th' line been able to do it for five years now, sheriff or big ranch or single avenger. I'd have to see it done to believe it."

"Well," said Perly, turning back to wash up, "I'm believin' in Boyce. He's a quiet feller, but he thinks a heap, uses his bean in other words, an' he don't fly off th' handle. *I* want t' be in when th' cattlemen ride."

"Yes," said Val, grimly, "and so do I."

"But you won't," said Briston, "I've heard you speak like that a time or two, girl, an' I don't want you to think serious along that line. Loss or no loss a party like that would be ain't no place for a woman, an' your dad will sit on you good an' plenty when he comes home an' hears you talk."

"I say so, too," said Siff, "this here Val Hannon, now, she thinks she's next to her dad—that she's mighty near a rider herself, bound to go everywheres we do."

"Oh,—and so you don't want me to ride with you —your high and mighty lordships?" said Val, bridling instantly.

"Anywheres on earth," answered Siff, imperturbably, "save an' except where you shouldn't. I'm with Tom—fer onct."

"Yes—an' only onct," said Briston.

Talk went fast about the rangeland concerning

this last atrocity of the mysterious raider. Its very simplicity was an affront, its boldness and dash an insult.

The Bar Star, the Circle A, El Rio Rancho, they were all roused to a keen appreciation of the state of things, and Boyce Clendenning was talking quietly of making a stand once and for all.

"It's a damned shame that cattle can't run in safety on the open range any longer," he said, "and no ranch can guard its herds in sufficient strength, and day and night. It would break up a cattle king."

But the Border was a wide place, indeed, with a thousand secret crossings, and it would take concerted action, eternal vigilance, and swift signal service to work out the plan that was beginning to form.

"But we'll have it," said Clendenning, "we'll hear and come and ride some of these fine nights—and we'll lift the shadow of the Black Rustler from the country—hang it to the Crag Oak as our fathers did Peg Hart in '67. The law of the range has changed but little since those days—caught with the goods, convicted. We'll catch the Black Rustler so. We'll be sure, and then we'll act."

And the feeling spread that perhaps Clendenning could do what he promised.

Val Hannon began to sing about the rooms of the ranch-house as she had not done since the black day which had seen the Redstar's loss. Not that she had forgotten the king. She would never forget

him—not in a thousand years. Only her own heart knew the restlessness that gripped her when the crimson veils sifted down the long slopes of the twilight and it seemed that she could hear him calling—calling from the Blind Trail Hills. But something within her bade her wait and hold herself with patience. Somewhere, deep within her consciousness, there was a strange, abiding faith that sometime, somehow, she would hear the long-roll of his running feet, know the splendour of his matchless speed again. What it was that prompted this she could not have told—she *felt* it, that was all.

And in the meantime a new glory seemed to sit upon the summer world, to clothe the heavens with mystic beauty. For the hand that Velantrie had leaned from his saddle to kiss was conscious of that caress in every pulsing vein. The girl's eyes were sometimes drowsy with that memory, her soft lips parted with the wonder of it. A fear was in her for the man's safety in the oblivion of that distant Border to which he rode, a trembling hope and eagerness for his return to Father Hillairé's garden. And she did not know what all these things portended.

But there was one at Paradise who watched her with anxious eyes and troubled heart—Briston, who had seen the girl grow up and loved her in a half-paternal way.

"There's somethin' new come to her," he told himself, smoking in the dusk beside the talking

spring, "now what th' hell can it be? Where's she ben to find it?" and he thought uneasily of that night at Hunnewell's.

He made a few gentle probes into Val's confidence, but for once in his knowledge of her he got nowhere, found nothing he wanted or did not want to know. Unconsciously she was silent, alert, guarding, as woman has been since time was when the depths of her heart are stirred. And that those depths were stirred at last for the first great time, attested this profound surge within her, this divine light that changed the world completely.

Val Hannon was her father's daughter. John Hannon had loved once—and with every fibre of his heart, brain and body.

She did not know it yet, but every faithful nerve and pulse within her was awakening to the gentleness and vital charm of the man from Oblivion whose reckless blue eyes were beginning to hold such a keen dismay when he looked at her.

And so it was that she rode more often to Refugio and sat in Father Hillairé's garden. That sharp and kindly man studied her with more distress than did Briston, for he knew a sad deal more.

Maria's joy and her returning health were a deep happiness to Val. Dusky roses were beginning to bloom in the wasted cheeks and the troubling cough was lessening—so wondrous a thing is love! As for Mesos, he was making himself a good husband, working for the *padre* among the herds, the sheep and the horses.

The fat cherub seemed to take a hold on his shiftless heart and Maria to come back to her rightful place therein, and all was well with the three. How much of this was due to natural causes and propinquity it would have been hard to say—or how much was due to that veiled threat of Don Quixote Velantrie of the Border, whom all *peons* knew, if not by sight, by the running word!

Val talked with the women in the kitchens, played with the brown baby, and lounged in the deep old chairs in the shadow of the Mission walls, but ever her dark eyes turned down across the southern plains, and it seemed she listened for the sound of horse's hoofs.

"My daughter," said Father Hillairé, one day, "are you happy?"

The long brown orbs flashed up at him with so swift and tell-tale a light that the wise priest was answered.

"Yes, father," she said simply, "I am—but for one thing."

The other sighed.

"You have known me all your life, Val," he said, "have I ever advised you wrongly in all that time?"

"No, father," she said wonderingly.

"Would you listen to me now—if I advised something that might—make you less happy?"

"I should listen and heed you, father, if I were dead," said the girl gravely.

For a long time Father Hillairé looked out along

the land, his fingers tapping the worn top of the table.

Then he sighed again and shook his silver head.

"Ah, well," he murmured, "perhaps 'tis just as well. As I said once before—it is in higher Hands than mine."

"Eh?" queried Val.

"I—was only testing your loyalty, dear child. I meant nothing."

And then, one day a little later, Velantrie rode into the garden on the good white horse—and he was doubly answered, for the look that leaped into Val Hannon's face was the "light that never was on land or sea" and she rose from her chair and went to meet the stranger as helplessly as the needle to the steel.

The man dropped from his saddle to strike a palm to hers—and for once in their friendship with him they had both forgotten the *padre* of Refugio.

When they turned to him the priest saw two things instantly—the joy of Val, the dawning struggle of the man.

"Father," said Velantrie, straightly, "I am in deep waters."

"Yes, my son."

"I merely turn my eyes to the fair shores for a fleeting comfort—ere I drift out to sea, beyond all hope."

There was a desperate longing in the words, a depth and wistfulness, that gripped the old man's heart.

He turned from them without a word, pacing the far end of the garden with his hands behind his back and his rosary swinging at his knee. Val Hannon listened to this mystic speech open-lipped, for she did not understand. Then Velantrie took her hand for a moment and smiled down at her—and it was as if she had known him always.

"You did come back!" she said.

"Yes," he answered, "the memory of—Josephina's *frijoles*—drew me afar."

And they both laughed at the plain delusion, after the fashion of the young, sat down beside the table and talked of a thousand lightsome things. The look in the girl's eyes, eager, true, believing, was like a hand on the man's heart, drawing out its truth, but not for a thousand worlds would he have spoken one serious word this day, have let her know the consternation there was in his inner soul.

He kept the speech to the commonplace, the pleasant badinage of friends, and talked of far places and distant towns—but nothing on earth could have silenced his blue eyes, nor the tell-tale tightening of his lips from time to time when their smile became too soft.

Velantrie was a man who mastered self, and he meant to do just as he had told the father—look for a short time—he meant to make it short—perhaps a trip or two more—at the fair green shores before he drifted out for good and all.

But ah, it was a dear dallying, there in the *padre's* garden, for every precious moment piled

high the load of pain this sweet keen girl would bear when he came no more—and, man-like, he did not think of that. He thought only of the wondrous memory he would carry with him into the dark places of the future.

So he talked with her, there in the shadow of the Church, his lips curving in the gentle smile that marked him, his blue eyes sparkling, his long fingers, stained with a thousand cigarettes, fiddling with the hat that hung on his knee. His keen face was full of expression. He played with fire, that he knew, and for the first time in his life was due to be burned thereby, but the cost of the joy he felt this moment, be it what it would, would be gladly paid in his heart's blood of longing when he came no more to the rangeland.

He was a strong man, this slim brown chap with the mysterious record, strong and very quietly assured. There were lines in his handsome face which showed that he would set him a goal and cleave to it, come what might. So now he took the cup that the moment held out to him, drank it to the last sweet drop—and knew that it held everlasting regret for him, the unquiet of a thousand nights under alien stars—if he should live so long. But then—there was no surety that Velantrie would live from any dawn to any dark.

So—he looked into Val Hannon's eyes, and his own blue ones said "I love you" with every glance, while his lips spoke trifles and laughing jests.

At last he rose and took his leave and the two in the garden watched him go.

As he swung from the gate Val's eyes begged mutely "You will come back?" and he hesitated—then flashed "I will."

Father Hillairé stood in the gate and sadness sat upon him like a garment, and the girl touched him twice before he turned.

"What is it, father?" she asked anxiously. But he shook his head again.

"Nothing that I can speak of," he said.

And all the way home to Paradise she troubled over the vague speech—what time she could take from the glowing dreams that peopled the high heavens and covered the world with light.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STIRRING TALK

JOHN HANNON came back to Paradise. In the gold and crimson lightwash of a summer's dusk they heard the far, faint sound of horse's hoofs, and Belle, whose hearing was marvellously acute, caught it first.

She rose from a chair in the shaded *patio* and held out a hand for silence.

"Hush!" she said, and Val and Briston, who were talking, became quiet. Perly's cigarette trailed off his under lip as he listened, for they all acknowledged Belle's superior ears.

"It—" she strained her every faculty for a tense second, then her face seemed to break in a thousand places to let her spirit flash out—"it's Lightning's stride!" she cried, "it's John!"

If she had said "It is the Millennium!" herself a martyr hanging on a Roman cross, the words could have held no more of glory.

"Ah!" she breathed again, "It's John!"

And it was John—John Hannon in the flesh, who rode straight to the *patio* and, swinging stiffly from his saddle, caught her to his breast. He neither looked at nor spoke to any other for a time—he held this woman whom he loved upon his heart and said

no word to any. Between these two none were needed.

But Belle's hands trembled on his shoulders and her transfigured face was white as milk. She clung against him with all her strength and the breath fluttered on her lips with ecstasy. And presently the boss swung her around in the bend of his arm and held out a hand to the foreman.

"Well," he said pleasantly, "how's everything?"

"Fine," said Briston, gripping the outstretched hand, "fine as silk! Glad you're back, though, John."

With a long sweep of his huge arm John Hannon caught his daughter and brought her in against him on the other side.

Val, contained as himself, but smiling with deep joy, laid her soft fingers over his big hand and gripped it hard. The long dark eyes she turned up to him were his own to the last sweep of lash, the last crinkle that attended them in laughter.

"It's been a long time, old man," she said affectionately, "and your women have been true to you. They've watched the trails at dawn and dusk—they've fairly ached to see your face, sometimes."

With one of the rare, the very rare, caresses that passed between them John Hannon bent and kissed his daughter's cheek. Then he turned to the riders who came clumping in along the stone flags, shaking hands and demanding news of the ranch.

To José, who came quietly reaching for Lightning's rein, he gave a pointed look and a sharp

word of direction. It was needed, for the beautiful gelding stood in the dusk with hanging head and dull eyes, his erstwhile sleek coat caked with dust and cut by trickling sweat. His slim legs trembled with fatigue, his nostrils shook with the heavy breaths that rattled in his sides.

"Great Pete, John," said Perly, wonderingly, "but you've put th' red boy through! Th' Black Rustler ben chasin' you?"

The boss laughed and ran a hand through his thick grey hair, while he tossed his heavy hat away.

"Not exactly, but I was in a hurry to get home. Ben gone long enough—eh, Belle, my girl?"

"Oh, John!" said Belle, and the word was eloquent.

"An' as I said once before," he continued, "there's somethin' by-ordinary in that Lightnin' horse. I'd stake a lot on him if I was bein' chased, for he's got th' wind an' th' stayin' stuff of th' Redstar himself, if not the speed. I'd stake a lot on him."

Then his women laid hold on the Boss of Paradise and carried him into the depths of the cool old house and there was much running of feet, and swift orders and the stir of deft hands in the kitchen, while a white cloth was laid on a little table in the living-room, for they must needs feed him at once and bring him a basin of water and a fresh towel. Belle opened the collar of his shirt with her own hands and brushed the hair from his

forehead and her soft voice was busy with the doings of their little world all the while.

Val looked on with smiling eyes and she was very glad indeed. It was a wonderful world, she thought to herself, and Paradise was the most wonderful spot in it—unless—unless it was Father Hillairé's garden beneath the Mission walls.

While the master ate with a hearty zest they told him all that had happened in his absence, even to the raid of the Flying Y and the driving of the eighty fat steers into the Blind Trail Hills, of the dummies that had guarded the pass, and of the slow rage of the cattlemen against the Black Rustler.

John Hannon listened attentively.

"Boyce Clendenning's at the head of things," said Belle, "and what that man undertakes he'll well-nigh put through. I've met him, John—he was here one day—and I hold with you concerning him. He's a real man and no mistake."

"Yes," said Val, humorously, "it's a mighty good thing you're home, dad. I had to hold her to keep her from following him off. She almost fell in love with Boyce."

"Why, you story teller!" cried Belle, indignantly under her own laughter, "John, don't listen to this young upstart. But you know what you have always told me of this boy—of his strength and earnestness. And I think you are right. He is strong and he is very determined. I saw that about this Black Rustler affair. You mark my words that

if the Rustler ever hits this country again, Boyce Clendenning will get him."

John Hannon's dark eyes dropped to the white table before him and neither woman saw or felt the sudden flame of fire that flared in them. It was a momentary flash of mad excitement, such as sometimes shows in the eyes of a drunkard or a lunatic. If John Hannon wanted the Black Rustler caught for any reason, personal or general, he might have felt the portent of the woman's speech, have seen the vision of its fulfilment.

The talk drifted to other things and presently Fanita came soft-footed to remove the tablecloth, while Belle went to the old piano, and the master sank back in his own deep chair with his pipe between his lips. His eyes rested on his wife's face as if they would devour it feature by feature, while he listened in ineffable content. He was very proud, this master of the *rancho,* proud of his holdings, of the deep old house and what it sheltered. Proud of this woman whose heart and soul were so fine and white, proud of the daughter she had given him, flesh of her flesh and soul of her soul. Val Hannon was the best thing in the rangeland in point of intellect, character and body. Beauty of brain, beauty of heart, beauty of vital young form, these she had abundantly and her father gloried in her superiority more than any one living knew. His pride centred in her more than in any other of his possessions. Not his love—that reached its pinnacle in Belle.

But Val, the Pride of Paradise—ah, she was well worth the thrill of possessed supremacy that stirred this strange man's heart at beholding her. His daughter, his horses, his range and his fields—his deep blue springs and his countless cattle—they filled him with so fierce a joy that his eagle eyes were wont to fire at thought of them.

The best in its line—that must John Hannon have or burn with humiliation. And that did his women believe in. They believed in him, first and foremost, then in his kingly right and standing in the cattle country. They believed in Hannon supremacy down to the ground, unconsciously, simply, because he stood for it. Belle believed in it blindly with a gentle obstinacy, but Val with a tentative fear. She had once spoken to Belle of this fear and of Father Hillairé who had no pride, and whose treasures, laid up in Heaven, were so great.

And all Paradise believed in it. All that is, save Briston the foreman. Tom Briston had been longer on the *rancho* than any other and he smoked many a quiet pipe and thought long thoughts of his own. But what he thought none knew, least of all the boss himself.

In Santa Leandra there was beginning to stir a hidden speech. When next the Boss of Paradise rode in to town he heard a bit of it, veiled and covered, but to a range man entirely understandable. It felt the pulse of every cattleman, and it felt John Hannon's and was satisfied.

"I'm with the movement," he said steadily, his

keen eyes giving back glance for glance to those who spoke.

Dyke Attison was in that day and he listened with a grim frown, for his right arm still hung useless.

"I'd have t' see it first," he told Sanchez later, "I'm still believin' in magic."

Brideman, big, burly, blond and thick with money, heard the remark and his eyes twinkled.

"Yes," he said genially, "John does seem t' have it, that's a fact. An' yet, you know, th' Black Rustler struck Paradise at last an' when he did he hit it hard, magic or no magic, fer that there Redstar horse was Hannon's one best bet."

"If he rides," said Dyke, stubbornly, "I'll believe—a little—an' not till then."

And Brideman's deep guffaw filled the narrow street as he slapped the speaker on the back with a huge and hairy hand.

"Well," he said, "I guess it don't matter much to th' man from Paradise whether any one believes —in magic—or not."

Lolo Sanchez passed that moment with a glance of her black eyes for every man in sight and Brideman looked after her, his bearded face alert.

"That girl o' yours, Sanchez," he said insolently, "is magic, all right."

The Mexican shifted on his feet and reached for a paper to roll a cigarette. His thin brown face, intelligent and quiet, changed subtly. He had

never forgotten that day of high play at Hunnewell's when Brideman had invited the girl in against his command.

"Yes, Señor," he said, "she is. Bitter magic. Some day she will stir up trouble for some one."

That was nothing new. All Santa Leandra knew that. Already she had set two youths of the town at swords' points, had parted Bar Barret and his wife, and witness the night of the dance when the blond boy had so nearly shot the stranger from the Border. Yes, Lolo was "bitter magic" indeed, as one man of the group was to find out on a day in the dim future.

At Paradise the talk of the stirring among the ranchers was daily diet. Perly, loquacious and open-eyed, gathered all he could from riders on the range and hashed it all over of nights in the lee of the bunk-house where the cowboys lounged and smoked.

The boss heard and listened, and his eyes took stock of every man in his outfit.

Then Boyce Clendenning rode over again, brought Belle some more books, accepted the new ones her husband had brought her in his saddle-bags in exchange, and talked long and earnestly with the rancher. They sat out in the *patio* and spoke alone together, for Val was out on Dawn-light and Belle had due regard for the master's dignity in heavy matters. The plans for catching and hanging a man, be he ever so black and guilty,

were not things for a woman's ears to her way of thinking—and she regretted Val's eagerness to see them consummated.

But John Hannon was grimly with Clendenning, hand and heart, it seemed.

"It will be a man-size job, John," said the younger man earnestly, "and some one's likely to get killed, for we all know the Black Rustler's fame as a gun-man. There was the posse at Clehollis—three men picked off like a top. There was the running fight with that rancher of Amaño—a brave man and a pity he had no help—which left him dead for the others to find. There was the great fight in that saloon across the Border when the Rustler cleared the bar-room and took the money from the till and got away with it. The one thing about this man is his wonderful courage. In all the tales they tell of him this thing shines out like a star—his hard personal courage that seems to look for danger and to glory in it. When we corner the Black Rustler the rangeland is due for the greatest fight it ever saw, and to lose some of its citizens. But," he added quietly, "we'll corner him if he ever ventures in here again and we'll—lose the citizens. It's a pity you haven't the Redstar, John, for we'll need the best and fastest horses we can muster when this great race comes off. You know what they say about the horse he rides, that it's the best the Border ever saw."

"Yes," said Hannon, knocking out the dottle from his pipe and watching the red sparks die on

the stone flags at his feet, "I know—and I wish I had the Redstar."

That peculiar savage light glowed for a second in his covered eyes.

"But—I still have Lightning, an' he's worth stakin' on. Lightnin's fair-to-middlin', you know, Boyce."

And he smiled genially at his friend. The rivalry of the horses was a friendly sore between them.

"Yes—and you'll need him," said Clendenning with conviction, "for when this race comes off it's going to be the best of its kind and we all want to be in on it."

"You're right," said the boss quickly, while his face showed for the first time a flame of excitement, "it will be all of that—an' I'll be there."

Clendenning rose, holding out a hand.

"Your amazingly wonderful wife was lamenting the other day that you might not get back in time. She thinks you alone could catch the Black Rustler, John, so bound up in you is she."

For a second the light in the master's face flickered. Then he laughed.

"Maybe I could," he said arrogantly with a flash of Hannon pride. Then he shook hands and watched the young rancher ride away on Dollar.

CHAPTER XV

ON THE RIM OF MESA GRANDE

VAL HANNON rode the rangeland constantly. Born to the open and the saddle as she was, she seemed filled with a keener restlessness than usual, a more poignant drawing to the sweeping levels.

Day after day she mounted Redcloud or Dawnlight—not so often Lightning, for since the Redstar's loss the master kept the racer up for his own use—and went away for long hours into the stretching solitudes. Dreams lived in her heart, vast, opal-coloured, cloudlike dreams that must have space and majestic silence for their contemplation. They were vague things, these dreams, vague as an infant's thoughts and as pure. They hardly touched the earth at all, save and except as they bore the scent of sweated horseflesh, the sound of poplars whispering in a little breeze, the shadow of a broad hat-brim across a strong lean face, the wonder of warm lips on an outstretched hand.

For John Hannon's blood was stirring in her and she had found her star. She had raised her innocent eyes to it in the peculiar idolatry of that strange staunch blood—and forever after she would know no other light. Horse—friend—lover—Val

Hannon would be true to them as simply as water to its level. So she rode among the *mesas* and dreamed her dreams, and always she listened for a rider's coming from the illimitable distances, searched the south for him.

And who shall say but that Velantrie, fighting his inner battle far away, drawn desperately by the triple lure of beauty, purity and honest love, felt the longing of her heart, the call of those warm brown eyes? At any rate he came again, on a windy golden day, and met the girl by the Antelope —and they had scarce need of speech.

They rode together with eager outstretched hands and eyes that searched each other's faces with a grave, fierce hunger.

"Val!" said Velantrie, softly, for the first time using her first name, even in his thoughts. Val did not answer, though her every nerve responded to the word. It seemed that for once in her life she could not speak, that there was a fog of joy within her throat.

She held hard to his hand and looked at him—just as her father looked at Belle. It was a pity that Belle Hannon could never see that look on her husband's face. Velantrie was more blessed. This day they did not think of Father Hillairé, though the man was bound for the Mission. Instead they sat for a while and spoke in strained short sentences, and all the while their eyes were speaking swiftly in the old, old way.

"Ride with me," said Val, presently, "I want to

show you my country—some of our springs—and Mesa Grande."

And Velantrie, the strong, the man who mastered his own desires, turned with her, weak as water in this one girl's hands, and rode with her openly across the plains. Gone were his resolutions to guard her from his presence, forgotten his promise to make his contemplation of the fair shores short! Velantrie of the Border rode side by side with the Pride of Paradise in the wide expanse and to any eyes beholding it would have blackened Val with a dark suspicion—a thing he would have died to prevent.

But look you, how Love dares!

So they went by Whitewater, boiling above its silver sands, stopped to drink and loiter by its sentinel trees, then on again toward the Mesa Grande looming majestically in the light.

This Mesa Grande was new to Velantrie. He did not know even that there was a way of reaching its high level. He gave vent to an exclamation of amazement at the narrow trail cut up along its precipitous side. Like ants crawling on a cathedral column, they crept up the frowning face to emerge on the crown of the world and to sit, swung sidewise in their saddles, scanning the plains below.

"This has always been a secret place for me," said Val, quietly, "I have come here always. It is so old and so still, so high in the sky, as if it is just under the feet of God and I sometimes fancy I can hear the angels' wings sweeping about the cliffs.

Of course it is only the little winds from the desert beyond, but it sounds like wings if you sit right still and listen."

Velantrie looked at her quickly and her lovely face was grave as a child's and as peaceful. Whatever others might feel at the nearness of celestial beings, or the eerie silence and loneliness of the ancient spot, this girl was at home with either. In her soul there was no fear of anything, either natural or supernatural.

A quick sigh drew across his lips and she turned instantly. They were near of kin, these two, ah, pitifully and tragically near!

"What?" she asked, as she had asked him once before at an unspoken thought, and as before he answered lightly, "Nothing—nothing in the world."

But at that moment he would have given all that earth could hold for him of wealth or honour or achievement—and it held, alas! none of the three —to have been the sort of man who could with honour ask her for her heart. He looked desperately out across the pale distances and the sickness within him was becoming fatal.

They dismounted and leaving the horses to stand in hip-dropped rest, walked here and there among the crumbling huts of a lost, forgotten people.

"They builded well," said Val, "they left something of themselves—their work—to attest their patience and their love of home. There is an old story in the land that they died by violence, this tribe who lived on Mesa Grande, that a conquering

tribe at last scaled their stronghold here, and that, rather than be taken, they flung themselves, women and children and all down to the last babe, over the precipice. I don't know how true it is, but I do know that there are many small pieces of bleached and broken bones at the foot of Mesa Grande at the west. They loved the sun, you know, and it must have been late in the day, so they made the great sacrifice toward him."

Velantrie, leaning against a wall as mellow as a sunset itself, listened with his longing eyes upon her face.

"Sacrifice," he said at last gently—"that is a wondrous word."

"The best in the language except one," she answered quickly.

"And that?"

"Love," said Val, simply, "because of love was sacrifice born!"

"Aye," said the man, "you're right."

They walked on again, winding among the blind-walled huts, stopping to scan some ancient picture cut crudely into the face of the structure, and finally stood on the northern edge of the high table-land. Far off on the levels they could see the gathered trees that sheltered Santa Leandra, mark the winding course of the green-fringed stream. Beyond, the low escarpment of the circling hills rimmed in the land.

Two atoms between the earth and sky they stood together for a long, long time and watched the

eternal solitude where nothing moved save vultures sailing high in the blue. It was mid-afternoon and the drowsy heat was tempered by a soft wind from the south. Where the central hut stood large among its fellows they stopped again and Val sat down, her booted feet crossed under her, and took off her hat. The hair was sweated on her temples and the man's eyes caressed each little pasted curl. His fingers twitched with the age-old ache to smooth them back, to touch the fair forehead beneath.

He rolled a cigarette instead and leaned against the wall.

"This was the council-house," said Val, "where the headmen gathered. It must have held a desperate council that far-off time when the enemy was coming up the cliff—I'd have liked to see those grim dark faces when they decided on the long leap for all their race."

"Look at mine!" said Velantrie with such sudden sharp bitterness that the girl caught her breath, glancing up with startled eyes.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Velantrie, "sometime of the Border," threw away the cigarette and sat down opposite her.

"What I said. Look at my face, Miss Hannon, and you will see the same desperate decision—for myself. Long ago I tried to make it—and for the first time since I can remember, failed. In all the great crises of my life I have been able to command myself—until—lately. Always I have prided my-

self on my inner strength. Now I find I am not so strong as I had thought—that is, that I have not been. I am deciding now—today—to 'build well' like our departed friends of the old huts here. I, too, have a leap to make. Help me to make it, Miss Hannon."

The smile that curled his lips was tender, but the look in his blue eyes was growing hard, like a martial flame struggling up to light a marching army.

"Too long I have dallied in this country," he went on, "I have wronged you, and Father Hillaire and—myself—in staying hereabouts."

Val wet her lips and listened gravely.

"I told you once that I was black with sin—and you ignored it. I told you that first night in Santa Leandra that if you knew me you might not take my hand—and you reached and clasped it."

"I could not help it," said Val, simply.

"Lord! Lord!"

He laid aside his heavy hat and wiped his face with a hand that was not quite steady. The lines of his features seemed to sink deeper in, as if he stood to his task with an effort.

"I am a man forsworn to blood," he said presently, "a man whom all the Border knows. I am a thief and a bandit. I have raided and pillaged for four years now, and my hand has been against the wealthy. I have a band of men who swear by me, hard characters all, and they follow me for the shares I give them of my ill-gotten gains. I hate them all to a man, almost, but I must have them."

He paused and looked hard in the girl's eyes. They were steady as harbour lights, though the blood was slowly draining from her cheeks.

"Is that enough?" he asked brutally.

"No," said Val Hannon, piteously, her fingers gripping the brim of her hat, "it is not enough."

"Then by Heaven!" cried Velantrie, leaping to his feet, "I'll tell you the rest!"

Val rose too and faced him with her pale lips fallen helplessly apart.

"I am on a man-hunt, forsworn to kill on sight —and have been for four black years—the man who killed my father!"

They stared hard at each other, these two young creatures there in the shade of the ancient council-house on the top of the world, and they looked with tragic eyes on the naked depths of each other's souls.

"Is it enough?" said Velantrie, hoarsely, "will you let me go now?"

But Val shook her head and put a strong hand on his shoulder.

"No," she said again, "never under God's heaven—if you want to stay. Do you?"

The man frowned and did not answer.

She leaned near, sweetly, dangerously near, and her dark eyes were the most wonderful things he had ever beheld in all his life—sane, suffering, honest to the depths, but filled with the martial light that had been in Father Hillairé's when he said "aye—the Christ and I." And under all the

strength and the courage that shone in them Velantrie saw that divine light grow and flame like an eternal beacon among the stars. With a groan he turned from her, covered his face with his hands and laid it against the wall.

"My God!" he whispered, "what shall I do?"

"Repent," said Val, sternly, "the door is open at Refugio—and in my heart."

In the tense silence that followed, tragic, pregnant, the heat seemed to glimmer faintly from the hard earth of the *mesa* and all the world about to listen. The shoulder under the girl's gripping hand trembled as with a chill.

Indeed a chill was at Velantrie's heart, anguish was in his soul. Too long had he dallied in the rangeland—and he was beginning to pay that price of heart's blood with usury. For this woman, this matchless woman of the high heart and the loving sweetness, this wondrous creature whose like he had never known before—stood before him and said courageously "the door is open in my heart!"

She did not ask his crimes, his methods or his reasons! She knew he was black with sin, that mystery surrounded him, that he went to oblivion and came therefrom to hold her hand a timid moment, that the good priest at Refugio would tell her nothing of him—all these she knew—and yet—"the door is open in my heart!"

A sigh that was near a sob heaved the man's shoulders and he straightened from the wall, wiping his ashen face with a downward sweep of his

hands. When he looked at Val again he had aged tremendously. But the shaking of his features was done. He was steady as a rock.

"If I could," he said, "I would—but my word is given to the dead. Let's speak no more about it."

"We will speak of it," said the girl, "do you think I'll let you go without an effort?"

"No," said Velantrie, swiftly, "I know that you would do more to save my worthless soul than I should ever let you."

"You have an oath to keep. A bad word broken is better than one kept. Will you not break this one—because I ask you to?"

"Don't!" cried the man, "Don't ask me that! The man was my father, and I loved him as few sons love their parents. Do you love John Hannon?"

Val caught her breath with a little gasp. He was bringing the thing close home to her.

"Yes," she answered.

"Could you see him killed before your eyes—and let the murderer go unpunished?"

Val's hand slipped from his shoulder and she turned frowning eyes out over the distant plain. Far in the pale expanse a rider on a pinto horse came idly by the *mesa*.

She studied it absently while she turned this over in her mind. John Hannon—big, iron-grey, handsome. If a man should kill him—aye, she'd be like this man before her, savage, hard as adamant, bent on revenge. Yes, assuredly—there was no

other way. Why, she had said she'd kill the man who stole the Redstar, for so slight a wrong as that! One's father, now—

"I see," she said at last slowly, "I understand."

"And when I've done the thing," said Velantrie, bitterly, "I cannot come back to you—not then."

"Why?" she asked simply.

Velantrie gulped and swallowed.

A wry smile curved up his lips pathetically.

"Because I can't," he said, "there is an ethics of the case which says the man who dares to lift his eyes to you must be clean as a man can be. I'm not that man."

"You are that man," said Val, clear-eyed, "there is no other."

"No. You've made me weak as water. I've lingered here when I should have been gone long back on the restless quest I've followed. Now I must be gone again. The clue I followed here has seemed to vanish in thin air, anyway, the clue of The Meteor."

"The Meteor? What's that?"

"The horse I told you of one day—the tie-twin of The Comet. The man I'm hunting for is the man who stole this horse—that black day across the Mexican Border which made me what I am. There had been great racing at New Orleans and my father, who owned these two wonderful horses, had had them there. They had run to within two seconds of the world's record and offers poured in from all sides for them. He would not sell them,

not for a thousand times their value, for he was a horseman born and they were his pride and glory. I travelled with him always, for we were all of our blood extant, the old man and I, and the life was gay and free. It was a clean life, too, for the pater was a clean and courteous gentleman, of good old Kentucky stock. After the New Orleans races we started for a town in Mexico. It was fine spring weather, and at El Paso we took the horses from the railroad and, with two trainers and extra mounts, were going down on horseback. I'll never forget his pride and pleasure in the splended animals.

"'Son,' he would say sometimes, 'these stars of ours will shine around the world some day.'"

"But his happiness was short-lived—a mere matter of a few pleasant weeks as we got farther down toward our destination—for one gorgeous twilight as we made ready to camp in a fold of the hills, two masked men dropped from a rocky pass and ambushed the camp. It was a daring thing, bold and clean-cut, and took us unawares, who were always prepared. They were white men—no Mexicans, and both were big men. The two handlers and I were willing to obey the guns we faced—but this Kentucky gentleman, this fiery old father of mine—ah, he was a fighter born! And it was his horses that the masked men wanted, his matchless racers!

"So he refused and leaped for his gun beside a rock—and the leader shot him as he ran! Shot him dead in his tracks, reaching for the gun! I think

I went mad that minute, for I leaped at the bandit then, half up on his horse I went, clawing like a cat. I carried a knife and I tried to kill him with it, but he beat me off with his gun-butt. As I fell, my face battered to a pulp by the flailing butt, I raked him with my clutching fingers—and tore away his mask. I saw his face, just one swift second before the darkness of failing sight blotted it out, and it was a handsome face, middle-aged and eagle-keen, and the long dark eyes that lighted it were hard as steel and terrible. When I came back to earth we were two dead men and two living ones, for one of the handlers had been killed also. The other was a brave chap and he brought me round, helped to gather up the scattered horses, and the next day we buried our dead at the foot of the hill. There at that unmarked grave I made my oath, and started out to keep it. For four years I have searched the earth for a big grey man with long dark eyes that glittered with a mad excitement—and some day I shall find him. There was but one bit of good left me from that bitter day—The Comet, who loved me best of all who touched him, would have none of the strangers.

"The trainer said he went mad as a lunatic when they tried to take him. Wild, screaming, furious, he charged them full, broke his rope and literally drove them into the sanctuary of the pass—but they took his gentler double, the starry-eyed Meteor. Out of the chasms and defiles The Comet came next day at my ceaseless calling, came ram-

pant and blowing, and we've been together ever since."

Velantrie ceased, rolled his wide hat aimlessly between his fingers and set it back upon his head. He pulled it well down above his eyes and turned to the girl with his old gentle smile.

"Come, Miss Hannon," he said, "let me take you down. The tale is told—the story finished. Now you know 'Velantrie, sometime of the Border,' save and except the fashion of my living. That can be told in a breath. I hate oppression. In Mexico it thrives appallingly. I have had to travel ceaselessly. I have put my hand against every man who wrongs a helpless one, and I have enjoyed the price I've made them pay wherever and whenever I could. I have stolen right and left—and given it right and left. I have kept nothing for myself except the bread I ate. And always I have searched—searched for The Meteor and the man who rides him—for I mean to have them both."

He reached for her hand with a firm grip and drew her with him out from the shelter of the council-house to where the horses stood at the steep trail's head. As they paused to mount, Val again put her hand on his shoulder and faced him gravely.

"Some day," she said softly, "some day—you—will come back—to me?"

The muscles in Velantrie's arms twitched but he held them sternly at his sides. The knuckles on his clenched hands shone pearly white with the effort.

"No," he said thickly, "I am—not the man."

But Val Hannon, her dark eyes dim with honest tears, leaned forward and kissed him square upon his tight-shut lips.

"Some day," she said with strange conviction, "you will come back—to the Church door—and—to me."

Then they mounted in silence, and in silence went down the trail to the levels below.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VIXEN'S HEART

"When love, rejected, turns to hate,
All ill betide the man."—KIPLING.

VELANTRIE'S soul was chaos. As he followed Val Hannon down the face of Mesa Grande a flood of bitter waters rose and drowned his inner self. Regrets, remorse, sorrow, they all took hold on him and wrung him like a rag between them.

What had he been? A bandit of the Border!

What was he now? The same and worse—a weakling, eating out his heart in sight of Heaven, neither able to enter or depart!

And his head was whirling like a drunkard's with the exquisite memory of that honest kiss. No matter what happened he would always have that, a priceless possession. If there had been any good in his life, if the books of the Great Recorder held any mark of merit in his name, this was his reward and he was thrice blessed. Always would this hour stand out as the crown of his existence, the peak and pinnacle.

And then they reached the bottom of the trail, set deep between huge shafts of rotting stone, and —came face to face with Lolo Sanchez on a pinto

pony. Dusky as sunset, full-blown as a flower, very beautiful in a sensuous fashion, she sat and looked at them—or at the man, rather.

Val she did not seem to see. The bud of her scarlet mouth broke over her small blue-white teeth in a smile that had ravished more hearts than one and she held out one slim hand.

"Master!" she said in Spanish.

Velantrie, roused from his tense reverie, pulled himself together and shook the hand politely.

"How do you do, Lolo?" he said.

"*Cómo está V.?*" she returned, still in the Spanish, as if by its use she narrowed the interest to themselves.

Velantrie turned to Val.

"Miss Hannon," he said, "do you know the Señorita Sanchez?"

"No," said Val and smiled.

But Lolo did not smile. Instead the look she threw at the other girl was slow, appraising, insolent. The Rose of Santa Leandra had never forgiven the loosening of this man's arm, the slipping of herself out of his consciousness when he glanced up that night at Hunnewell's to face John Hannon's daughter. Therefore she hated the woman.

"What matters?" she said, "I—am only—Lolo of Leandra, too lowly for the Pride of Paradise to see."

With consummate art she dropped her wonderful eyes, and she was on the second the lowly, as she said, the meek, the far beneath. Only Lolo of Lean-

dra—poor in this world's goods, a little sister of the more fortunate. And Velantrie was the friend of such.

Val, understanding perfectly, stiffened in her saddle and a slow flush grew in her cheeks.

The girl looked up and all her flower face melted in beauty of tenderness as she smiled at him.

"None but you, my master," she said softly, "is so kind to me. Women hate me—all of them. . . . I have still the gold you gave me—and the kiss as well."

Velantrie's nostrils drew in in a sharp white line.

"Lolo," he said, "speak English."

"No need," said Val quickly, "I understand."

He did not look at her, though a cold hand gripped at his vitals.

"Well?" he said.

"Nothing," said Lolo like a child.

Verily do things rise from the past like evil ghosts, thought the man. That cheap and tawdry kiss, given in the gaiety of a reckless moment, came back to damn him now in the one woman's eyes as a worthless trifler. What could she think, what could she feel but a nauseous revulsion, even as he himself felt it!

He looked at Lolo and the sparkle was hard as flintstone in his eyes. The little vixen meant to do the trick she had done, to step between and turn Val from him.

But to his astonishment Val spoke.

"Well?" she said, "Velantrie is good to all,

He has given gold to many, and a kiss is sign-manual of a gentle heart."

The man drew a long breath, held it, let it out.

Lolo flashed a glance at Val then—a venomous spurt. Artist recognized artist.

"But not like mine!" she cried. "He gambled for and won me! He is my master!"

"Perhaps," said Val, sharply, "and he will know what to do with his possessions."

"Lolo, little one," said Velantrie, "tell it all."

"What all is there, save that you won me fair-and-square from Brideman?"

Another long breath lifted Velantrie's breast. Lolo and all her kind were monstrous to him now—but she was a woman and he had never spoken harshly to a woman in his life. He turned and looked at Val—and his heart leaped at the steady faith which burned in her eyes.

"I can explain——" he said, but she shook her head.

"Why should you?" she answered, "I need no explanation. Your face is enough for me."

"My God!" groaned Velantrie, "what have I done to be worthy! Father Hillairé was right—I should have gone long back!"

He passed a hand across his eyes and addressed Lolo gently.

"Lolo," he said, "go home—and as I told you that day, don't try these shameless tricks."

A red flame mounted to the girl's very hair, burning, hot, furious.

"A wonderful understanding!" she cried, "great faith and confidence—between Miss Val Hannon of Paradise—and—the Black Rustler! Very beautiful—*mi Dios!*"

And with a swing of her braided quirt on the pinto's flanks she whirled and was gone around the broken fringes of Mesa Grande.

The Black Rustler! Before Val's eyes the levels shimmering in the afternoon sun seemed to rise and dance grotesquely. She put out a hand to steady herself and grasped the empty air. Velantrie, quivering in his saddle, did not touch it.

The Black Rustler! Curse of the cattle country—enemy of right—lifter of horses—with a price upon his head!

And Boyce Clendenning set like a hound upon his trail! She seemed to feel again the reticence of the riders at Paradise to discuss the Rustler—remembered the tight-lipped quiet concerning that night at Hunnewell's! A thousand small things rose up and took on meaning in her jumbled consciousness—and still the levels danced and her mouth was dry as ashes. No sound came from her white lips but she felt as she had felt that noon when she groped for the step and heard her father say "Are you my daughter? Then buck up and be a man!"

The pain in her heart at Redstar's loss had been a bagatelle compared to the black anguish that lay there now!

The Black Rustler! Velantrie—the slim, the

vital, the tender! Velantrie of the sparkling eyes! This, then, was what he had meant when he had asked her to "let him go"—was what Father Hillairé had meant when he said "if I should tell you something that would make you less happy"—this was the hideous meaning of it all!

And still the levels danced and a fog was in her throat. And Velantrie himself sat there with his eyes upon her face and said not a word. At last she wet her lips and turned to him—and the man cursed inwardly at the anguish on her face—

"Tell—me," she said thickly, "that it—is—not true! Deny——"

Velantrie turned his gaze from her and looked out along the plains. The blue eyes narrowed, the stern look that the Border knew came hard about his mouth. He thought of his promise to the *padre* —of the Church door—and the woman. Of the dallying and the pain it had brought at last. The hand lying open on his pommel closed.

"No," he said at last, "I—do not deny."

Val's face worked and she put out a trembling hand. Always it seemed she was reaching, consciously or unconsciously, for this man.

"You—can not?"

He thought a moment.

"No," he said, "can not."

Her lips were shaking, the tears were welling in her dark eyes, all but spilling over.

"Even so," she said, "you are my man. Goodbye."

Without a word Velantrie struck spurs to the horse beneath him and shot forth to the hot plain —and oblivion.

And Val Hannon at the trail's foot laid her face down in Redcloud's mane and fell to weeping—the low, deep weeping that comes but rarely to strong and sustained natures.

CHAPTER XVII

BRISTON DOES SOME THINKING

MANY things were brewing in the rangeland. Among the ranchers the talk had crystallized into preparedness. Meetings had been held, squads apportioned for different parts of the country under this rancher and that to patrol and to watch, a system of fire-signals—farthest reaching sign-speech of the plains—agreed upon. Boyce Clendenning and his neighbours meant to lose no more fat steers, no more hard-earned profits.

At Refugio Father Hillairé read his ancient books and sighed uneasily. A nameless stir was in the air, and he prayed often and fervently for Velantrie, who came no more to the Mission.

At Santa Leandra, Lolo Sanchez studied a man with her cunning eyes and cast the light of her smiles that way—and the man was none other than that huge bulk of laughter and mysterious wealth, Brideman. Amazed, flattered out of all reason, the bearded giant came often to Leandra and he tied his horse at Sanchez' fence, to stand in the shadow of the cottonwoods and talk with the girl.

And far in the rugged fastnesses of the Blind Trail Hills the days wore by with weariness. In Redstar's hidden glade the path by the binding walls was growing deeper, the top sapling of the in-

set gate was thinned and ragged, flaunting long white fibre banners to the breeze, for the stallion never ceased his constant gnawing at the hindering bars. As for the king himself, he was lean with the endless fret, hard as nails with the everlasting runs about the walls, and his eager eyes were hollow with despair.

And dusk after dusk he stood out in the centre of the green floor and called his ringing peal. Only the silence and the coming night answered with their echoes and their loneliness.

At Paradise the old free life had passed beneath a shadow, for Val, the light of the *rancho,* was dim with a strange depression. There was no laughter on her lips now, no pretty tricks delighted the riders coming in or going out. Instead a mortal sickness was in her long dark eyes, a tremble was always just behind her lips.

"For th' love of Pete, Val," said Perly, miserably, "what's ailin' you? Is it anything we've done—any of us? If it is tell me an' I'll bust th' son-of-a-gun till his mother wouldn't know him. Tell me, Val."

But the girl shook her head and turned away, and Briston swore at Perly with his eyes.

Belle, the keenest heart at Paradise beside her daughter's, knew that something was vastly wrong and she made one gentle probe to find its cause.

"Val darling," she said, "there's a shadow in your sky. Can you tell your mother?"

And Val, standing by a window in the twilight

where the fine-leaved vine grew thick, saw the crimson and purple veils waver through her slow tears.

"It's not a shadow, Belle," she said, "it's the end of the world, seems like—but I cannot tell it—not even to you, for there's a secret with it that's not mine."

"It isn't Boyce, of course?" asked Belle half hopefully.

"No—it isn't Boyce, of course."

"Nor any one at Paradise?"

"No."

And Belle fell silent, thinking of the boy from Texas with the "feet like thistledown." Perhaps it might be he. There was no other on whom she could settle from the remembered snatches of Val's talk after the scattered dances.

But if all Paradise knew that Val was in trouble, there was one who gave it little thought—the boss himself. John Hannon was a strange man these days, who had always been so to his subordinates. He seemed strung like a singing wire, full of energy, blazing with a zest of life that made him marked among the slower blood of more youthful men. He entered into the ranchers' plans for the capture of the Black Rustler with vim and apparent joy.

"Perhaps John Hannon's magic," he said pointedly to them one day, "will work again—in another way."

And sometimes his eyes, dropped quickly when he felt their tell-tale fire, shone with that odd excitement that was mad as lunacy.

"Th' best in its line," he muttered to himself once smoking in the *patio,* "th' Black Rustler—is th' best in his line."

When the ache in her breast became so heavy as to be unendurable, when it seemed every breath she drew was fraught with pain, when only sighs were on her lips to ease the stricture of her lungs, Val saddled Dawnlight and went to Refugio.

"*Padre,*" she said, standing by the little table where she had listened entranced to Velantrie's pleasant speech so long—so long ago it seemed!—"*padre* dear—I've come for help."

Her lips quivered with the troublesome tears that were so near her eyes now, and Father Hillairé looked deep into her face, opened his old arms and took her in against his breast with her forehead pressed to his shabby cassock.

His own heart was very bitter and sad at that moment, torn with a thousand griefs—the griefs of all humanity. Why, oh, why, had that reckless youth come like a flaming meteor out of the south to burn and sear with his forbidden charm this wholesome, happy life! This child he had almost raised, this sweet and true woman, for whose happiness he would, as he had said, have laid down his own worn-out body—it was a bitter reward indeed for all his labours, all her truth and obedience.

And yet, strive as he might, he could not blame Velantrie. Velantrie, with his bitter pledge, his memories biting like a whip, his reckless life that must eventually end where all such must—in igno-

ble death. Verily the sorrows of the world pressed down upon the priest heavy as the hand of doom—and his own tears salt and bitter with experience, sweet with divine love, fell on Val's black head.

"Tell me," he said, "what you have learned."

And into this wise heart which had been her safe confessional since she could remember, she poured the story of her love and its bitter end.

"And Lolo called him, *padre,*" she sobbed, "the —ah!—the Black—Rustler—and he—did not deny! He said—ah!—that—he *could* not!"

"*What?*" cried Father Hillairé, the tears suddenly blinked from before his vision, "why—he——"

Then he drew in his breath with a whistling sound and said no more.

"Higher Hands," he murmured, "perhaps—ah, well, it is in higher Hands than mine, at last."

And to himself he said sadly, "Tragedy steps this way with her head covered. Ah, Val, Val—my little, little one!"

But the habit of a wonderful life was strong upon him and he gathered his spiritual forces to weave a web of comfort in which to wrap this young soul, quivering from its first great blow. So well did he succeed that when she went back to Paradise some four hours later Val Hannon was her father's daughter once again, strong, contained, ready to face the odds of life with the great courage that was inherent in her.

So time passed. The heat of the summer les-

sened, the soft blue haze deepened on the plains, and Indian Summer came overnight. Its little cool winds were soft as the breath of a child, the gold of its sunlight thrice refined and tender.

To Val this mysterious season, short-lived and precious, had always been a time of great joy, of sweeping rides on Redstar when the world invited and she leaped to its very breast, when she seemed more than half wild, a thing of the plains and sky.

Now the levels called to her in vain. There was no red king to come at her call, to sail away beneath her like the flowing winds themselves, and there was no joy, anywhere in the wide universe, to attend her.

All the meekness and patience she had learned in the sacred quiet of Refugio seemed hollow mockeries. What had she done that this bitter cup must come to her? Ah—but Christ drank the brew upon the cross. And He was innocent as any lamb. So she went about her daily duties with a grip upon herself, and there was no shame within her that she loved the Black Rustler, only a sorrow so vast that it darkened all the world. And added to the pain was such a fear that cold sweat stood upon her temples under the little curls Velantrie had longed to touch, and her heart seemed very small and tight in her breast.

For this fear sprang from the thought of Boyce Clendenning the man who "would get what he went after," and from knowledge of her father. If these two men, the flower of the rangeland to

her mind, rode after the Rustler his doom was sealed. And that doom! A dozen times she started up in bed with a choking cry at dreams of the Crag Oak springing from the Blind Trail cliffs with a black body swinging from its long, grotesque limb! A slim dark body with the moon behind it, its graceful limbs limp and swinging in the little breeze! At each repetition of this awful dream the girl would cover her face with her shaking hands and sit huddled in her blankets, cowering before that stern thing, Life, and its retributions.

But still within her there was no shame, while there was a something she could not define—a faith, a feeling, an intuition, what you will, that held Velantrie good despite it all. Good—yes. Those deep blue eyes of his with the tender light that flamed and flickered, there was gentleness there, and the simple truth of the heart that women know and prize. The winning smile, the handclasp, warm and tight and honest—these came to her tortured soul and gave it comfort. Whatever of wrong and sin could be laid at the Black Rustler's door, she knew within her that he had never harmed a child or a woman or a dog. And neither could she reconcile the loss of Redstar now—for with that same keen inner sense she knew Velantrie had never taken him.

So the days went by on leaden feet, sweet blue days, hazy, soft, filled with the mystery of spring, the mild content of summer, the forecast of the fall.

Sometimes Val turned her eyes to where Mesa

Grande stood like a flat-topped mountain, and then she grew weak in the knees with memory of that last terrible day, leaned against a wall and slow tears filled her eyes.

Verily what Father Hillairé had hoped would always pass her by, had found her out—she who was "born to peace and the even way of honour and of happiness!" Sorrow had set its seal upon her, tragedy held a hovering hand above her head. And every rider at the *rancho* was beginning to feel, in varying degrees, that the trouble which had so changed the Pride of Paradise had to do with that far-past night at Hunnewell's and the man they were beginning to call the Black Rustler, though how or why they could not figure out.

Briston smoked many cigarettes under the stars and wove long webs of thought and a great unrest was on his faithful heart. He saw many things that others did not and he watched several persons covertly—among them José.

He had long watched José. The slim brown Mexican was very clever, very quiet and contained. Miguel and Arlas, the latter long since keeping house with pretty Felicita in the good cabin beyond the third corral—they were clear ponds compared to him. Also the Indian *vaqueros*.

José, now, José with his fathomless eyes and his silent step—who on the *rancho* so well fitted to leave the place in the night and be back at dawn with no one the wiser? Who, for instance, with the adroit cunning to wrap a horse's feet? Who made

such fancy hackamores—to bind a restless nose? And whose eyes, among all the riders, lifted to the boss's with just that lightning flicker, fell so swiftly when the flash between the two was done?

Yea, verily—Tom Briston wasted long night hours when he might have slept, and much good tobacco—thinking.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FACE IN THE DOORWAY

ONCE more Santa Leandra drowsed beneath its trees. Like an ancient dame among towns she sat above her priceless stream, her old head nodding in the haze, her hands folded in her lap. Her doors were open to the soft winds and the sunshine, her countless babies brawled in her silent streets, her nondescript dogs slept on her sills.

Marta Winne, still unlovely of person and virtuous, gossipped in her mossy back yard with a woman in faded calico and slatted sunbonnet.

"Th' little hussy gets worse an' worse," she said, "she's hard an' calculatin' an' full of laughter. You can't tell me! She's brewin' trouble again an' I know it. If Brideman had a woman, some one'd better warn her—but he ain't, not that I ever heard of."

"No," said the other woman, "I guess he ain't. An' it's a good thing, too, for Brideman's a strange man. He's always comin' and goin', with money in every pocket—an' where's he get it? as I says to John. Where's he get it? An' all th' funny things he plays away—th' ivory hand, f'r instance—that same that Lolo wears on a chain around her neck now—an' th' old ring with the poison blade in it."

She shook her head darkly. "Yes, it's well he ain't married."

"He's in today," said Marta, "see that big raw-bone horse of his tied under Sanchez' trees? I bet th' Mexican's wild inside him at that. He's got no love for Brideman, none in th' least."

True enough. At the tumble-down picket fence that flanked the Sanchez cabin there stood a huge dark horse, ill made and awkward, its slug head drowsily hanging, its broad hips slung sidewise as it rested. It was hung together like a scaffold, and it seemed its giant bones must creak when it moved, —but there was not a man in Santa Leandra who knew that when it squared away in action with the open plain for field there was not a horse in all the rangeland that could catch it, neither Dollar, nor Silkskin, nor yet five of Hannon's Red Brood—save and except that lost glory of Paradise, Red-star, the king—that Lightning himself could do no more than run with it.

For this ungainly horse was part of the mystery that was Brideman, and he had never entered the town upon it faster than a trot. Today it seemed asleep, slow, sluggish, stupid. But the big man leaning on the pickets with Lolo's hand in his in open sight, knew that should he leap to its saddle with a certain sharp command it could, and would, spring out of its lazy droop like a spring released.

But Brideman was not riding this day. He had just come and he meant to stay long, for Lolo smiled at him in a way that made him mad with

desire—and there was likely to be play at Hunnewell's, since he saw the hard lean horses of Velantrie's band tied at the hitchrack.

There was no mistaking the great red stallion with the sweeping mane and tail, the dusky cloud drifting across shoulder and hip where the dim black dapples shone, the regal head and the flashing dark eyes. To any one who had once seen him he was unmistakable.

Inside, the quick-eyed bunch who followed him stood round Velantrie at the bar and waited on Hunnewell's deft hands for the refreshment for which their throats were parching.

For Velantrie had not left the rangeland—only a certain enchanted part of it. He rode no more by Mesa Grande save as he came to Santa Leandra, and the pale walls of the Mission haunted him like a ghost. Even the old town would soon be a thing of his past, for he was all but ready to move on into that vast and illimitable West along the Border where all his ilk drift sooner or later.

There was one last thread to slip his feeling fingers down, to trace to its end—and then adieu, all dreams, all faint visions of that high plane on which he had wandered vicariously these past few months. For some one, a meek brown Mexican who hung about the town, had dropped an artless word concerning a horse, a great red horse, tall and slim and shining with red fire, whose speed was said to be as the winds themselves, on whose shoulders there was a misty cloud of black! That was all.

Neither where this horse lived nor who was his owner, and Velantrie, looking carelessly away at some point of the compass, had not asked. But a fire was in his heart, as always when he found, or thought he found, a faint line in the dust to follow.

So he came, now and again, to Santa Leandra and always his soul strained at its bonds of flesh to hear all, see all, feel all and betray none of what it gathered.

Lolo Sanchez he saw once and again, but to save his life he could not bear the sight of her face, the sound of her voice with its hard shrill gaiety. She had cost him too much, he thought savagely.

And yet, had he threshed the thing out with his usual cool judgment he would have known that Lolo had forced the great decision at which he had faltered so long. Forced it, yes—for deep down in his heart he was not sure that he could have ridden away from Mesa Grande with Val Hannon's kiss upon his lips had it not been just as it was. He had said he was decided—but could he have made it good, under those true brown eyes with the tears in them?

This thought was with him today as he stood frowning at the bar—and he snapped his fingers, shook his head.

"Water," he said to Hunnewell when the glasses were filled.

Then he moved among the booted and spurred cowboys, selected a chair a little to one side with his back toward the wall and his eyes toward the

door—a never-failing precaution with him—and sat down. He drew money from his pockets and reached for the cards that lay, new in their bindings, on the dirty canvas table top. As he did so, Brideman loomed in the doorway, searching the crowd with his hilarious blue eyes.

"Hel—lo!" he shouted, "th' young feller that once floored Brideman! Back f'r more play! Play with me, young 'un?"

"Sure," said Velantrie, briefly, looking up, "we play with any." He was the only man in the country who would not have added the usual "one."

The old reckless gaiety and light were in his face intensified a thousandfold, though somehow changed. Where it had once been joyous, carefree, youthful vim that lighted his mobile features, now it was a certain hardness, a forced cheer. The pleasant gentleness of his eyes was gone. They were impatient, quick, taking stock of this and that as if for a purpose.

Hunnewell, nonchalantly wiping up his ancient bar, glanced at him and saw the change.

"This here Don Kee-ota," he said to himself, "ain't jest th' same. Perhaps—jest perhaps, now—he's heard this Black Rustler talk—but he's a brave man if he has, an' still comes into Santa Leandra where every man is watchin'."

And the unspoken word was true in all respects. Velantrie was a brave man—and all the town was watching.

Brideman came in with a rattle of spurs, a heave

and lurch of his massive body, pulled out a chair and sat down facing him, laid money on the table, and the game was on.

Far out across the levels to the south and east two riders came on swift horses, and they would have challenged any eye beholding. Both horses and riders seemed "the best in their line"—Lightning and Redcloud, shining in their perfection, cantering gracefully, neither hurrying nor hanging back but covering ground in that amazing efficiency of the really fast horse—John Hannon and his daughter erect in their saddles with the martial carriage that marked them both. They rode exactly alike—in every motion, every posture. If Val had been a son she would have been her father's double. As it was she was, as she had once told Velantrie, "a chip off the old block."

They were headed for the distant town and they talked desultorily of this and that, and fell silent for long spaces. Your true plainsman can be eloquently silent, and comfortably so as well.

In one of these long intervals Val was thinking, as she thought so often, of Velantrie, and her face, despite the care she was exercising lately to control it, showed the sadness of her heart.

"Dad," she said presently, "what constitutes a good man?"

Her father glanced swiftly at her under his hat brim.

"A brave man, an' a quick one on th' trigger," he said.

"Right or wrong?"

"Bah," said the Boss of Paradise, "what's right an' wrong? Right—to make, an' keep, your fam'ly happy—to succeed in everything you undertake. Wrong—to fail in both."

"It's a funny world," she said again some time later.

"Mighty good world," answered Hannon, "there's no end to its chances—if a man knows how t' play them, an' has courage."

The girl grew deep in reverie and said no more, and the plain swept back and Santa Leandra loomed before them, drowsy, basking in the blue-gold haze. Then they cantered down the street and stopped at Hunnewell's.

As they dismounted Val turned to tie Redcloud —and stopped in her tracks, her hands arrested on the rein, her mouth fallen open. Her eyes, widened to their limit, stared helplessly. Then a flood of joy burned over her face from brow to throat and she sprang forward with a cry that was half a sob.

"*Redstar!*" she cried, "*Oh—Redstar!*" And flung herself against the hitchrack to reach her frantic arms for the great head among its cloud of mane.

But it was well the hitchrack was between—for the stallion, unused to women, owning but one master among men, savage by instinct and quick as lightning, sprang up, the full length of his rein, on his hind legs. His ears flattened to his head, bowed

on his arching neck, his eyes flashed with rage and enmity, his teeth gleamed in his open mouth, and he came down striking the rail with his iron-shod forefeet, a raving demon.

With a gasp the girl fell back, her face like ashes. For a tranced moment she stood so, while into her mind there flashed the words of Velantrie, "wild, screaming, furious . . . he literally drove them into the pass."

This was not Redstar—but—The Comet! The Comet—double of—The Meteor—once within two seconds of the world's record at New Orleans! And she had taken him, literally and instinctively, for Redstar, the king of the Red Brood!

Certain things were getting tragically mixed, hopelessly entangled. A vague misgiving rose in her breast and gripped her. What did these things mean? Then she raised her eyes and looked at her father.

A little way apart John Hannon stood looking at The Comet—and she did not know him! Another John Hannon it was—a tense, poised man with his hand upon his gun, with nostrils that shook in and out, and with hard dark eyes that shone and glittered with excitement!

"Dad!" she breathed, but he did not hear her.

Instead he was thinking fast, while a strange uncertainty sat upon him. He moved at last, as if to take saddle again—then stopped, threw up his head with a motion Val had never seen in him, and came back to himself with a jerk.

"Well," he said collectedly, "let's go into Hunnewell's."

Inside, the men playing at the tables had heard the stir of arrival, but arrivals were common at Hunnewell's. Therefore they paid it no attention.

None save Velantrie. Though he placed his money and went on with the game, he yet heard and knew that two people were coming up the steps to the open porch—but he did not know that of all people in the world they were to him the most important. He moved the cards in his hand, shifted the cigarette in his lips, frowned through the smoke —and glanced at the door.

In the next second there was the sound of a falling chair, a catlike leap, and Velantrie of the Border was in the middle of the floor, his gun in his hand and his blue eyes narrowed to cold points—for John Hannon's face was in the doorway!

Two shots sounded as one—and Velantrie whirled, fired again, wildly, and recovered—but Hannon's gun was on him, the hard dark eyes menacing him with instant death.

"Well," said the cattleman evenly, "what's this?"

"The end," said Velantrie sharp as a shot, "for one of us."

He put out a hand and caught a table near.

"Shoot me," he said again in that rapid way, "as you did my father—you damned murderer! Take The Comet as you took——" But John Han-

non's finger jerked before the word was done and once again the big gun spoke—spoke with the intent of death and silence for that rushing tongue. But fate and justice seemed to favour Hunnewell's, for on that instant Val from behind caught her father's shoulder, just as she had caught the blond boy's, and swung him out of line. Her face stood where his had been a second before and filled Velantrie's vision with its likeness to that other.

Feature for feature and line for line it was the same! Woman-soft where the other was eagle-keen, its long eyes smiling where those were hard as flint—it was the same yet not the same! In that first strained look Velantrie knew why Val Hannon's face had puzzled him so long!

In awe and tragic wonder they stood for a second, staring tensely, these two who loved each other to the foundations of their souls. Then Velantrie, his face like the death she had again averted, groped blindly for a firmer hold on the table and swayed upon his feet. His blue eyes were piteous, his lips drawn with the monstrous knowledge that was his.

Then that great goodness which was in his heart, which Val had dimly felt, and which made him friends among the children and the dogs, rose out of its depths of sin and bitterness and glorified him, all unknowingly.

"I beg your—pardon," he said as if from a great distance, "gentlemen—I was mistaken. This is—not—my man."

Then he crumpled like a broken reed and went down in a heap.

With a cry Val Hannon sprang in among the stirring men, snatched his fallen head and raised it to her breast.

"Val," murmured Velantrie and said no more.

"Velantrie!" screamed the girl, unconscious of the staring crowd, "Oh, Donald!"

Then her father's hand was on her shoulder, lifting her bodily, a dozen other hands pulled the man away from her, and in the flurry that followed she found herself swung helplessly into her saddle, the reins put in her fingers.

"Ride," said John Hannon beside her, and she rode—but the earth and the heavens tumbled about her and twice in the silent journey, when he did not deign to look back where danger certainly lurked in that bunch of men who followed Velantrie, the Boss of Paradise had to steady his daughter in her saddle.

Not one word did he ask her, then or after, about the whole affair, but put her in her own bed with his own hands and bade the women leave her alone, saying that she had had a turn and would be better soon.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLACK RUSTLER RIDES

BUT the boss was mistaken. Val was not better soon. For three days she lay in her bed in the deep south room and scarcely knew day from darkness. Belle was terribly distressed and begged both her and John for explanation, but from the one she got only moans and silence, from the other the brisk assurance that something must have happened to one of the girl's friends in Leandra to upset her—"maybe th' Texas boy's got him another girl an' Val heard it," he said, and Belle, though she did not believe, must needs be satisfied.

Through Val's poor brain there wound a tumbling train of thoughts, any one of which was cause for despair.

Was Velantrie dead? Was her father's bullet fatal? And why had John Hannon shot him, at sight—without a second's pause—for all the world as if he had been prepared to do it when he mounted the steps! Why had he looked so strangely at the Redstar's double—with that awful excitement in his eyes?

It was as if—as if—she swallowed the lump in her throat that choked her—as—if he recognized the horse!

She shuddered, and closed her eyes and her brain against the thought, opened them both again and fell to the same desperate thinking. She was cold with fear, numb and sick with sorrow.

If Velantrie was dead—Ah, Mother Mary! Never in this world would she see sunlight and shadow, *mesa* and plain again with the old sweet joy. Life would be dead in her, like the ashes of a burnt-out fire.

But she was young and magnificently healthy—and she had the courage of her father's blood. Therefore she rose and came forth to confront the household with haggard eyes and cheeks that had thinned overnight, it seemed—to find the riders tense and silent, her mother sad with the old loneliness, for the boss was gone again. Once more had the far country called him and he had answered—answered on the hour, with his eagle eyes alight, his nostrils flaring.

A mighty relief let loose the breath in Val's breast, for she did not want to face her father. If Velantrie was dead— Oh, how her soul wavered at the unspoken words!—if—he—was dead, she knew in the depths of her being that she could never forgive the hand that had done the trick, never look into those hard dark eyes again without black and everlasting hatred in her own.

No matter what he was—bandit—lifter—Black Rustler himself—Velantrie was her man and she was his woman with all that meant of blind fidelity, of faith and the fighting right to stand by.

The riders were horrified at her appearance and silence fell upon them to a man—for Perly had been to Santa Leandra and learned the whole affair. And Briston had found the answer to his puzzle. He knew now what and who had lit the glow that had shone in Val's sweet face for all these many weeks. If it sent a wistful pain to his own heart he thought of his years and the good friendship which was, and would always be between him and the Pride of Paradise, and was content. And he began casting about in his mind—see how Love serves its own—for a way to avert the tragedy that impended when the Black Rustler should again ride in the rangeland, and the ranchers should ride, too.

And then Val came to him where he smoked alone in the *patio* under the stars, and put a hand upon his shoulder. Briston dropped his cigarette and reached up to take the hand in his, to hold it between his two big palms in the comforting silence of perfect understanding.

And Val, heavy-eyed with tears, sank down on the bench beside him and put her forehead where the hand had been. More than one soft head had rested on Briston's shoulder in the many years of his roving, but none that so pulled at his heart as this drooping black one.

Therefore he sat still and waited as the perfect friend waits. Presently, with a sigh, the girl said, "Tom."

"Yes, Val."

"Will you—can you—find out—if Velantrie——"

"Don't need to find out. Perly was in town a day or two back—an' they said at Hunnewell's that his men picked him up an' took him off, swung across that horse of his with a man to help him ride, an' that he was comin' round then. Old Doc Tackert happened to be there that day an' he looked him over before they left an' said he was not seriously hurt. Th' ball went in on th' left side close above th' heart,"—Val shuddered against him—"you know, it seems he was a little to th' right an' —an'—John was in th' door, so th' shot was glancin', like. It hit a rib an' tore right round it to th' back an' out. It was th' stroke of th' bullet, so close against th' heart, that knocked him out. Th' shock, you know. He'll be all right in a matter of days, a man like him—hard as nails. He'll come round all right."

"*Dios gracias!*" whispered Val against his shoulder and Briston felt the whole tightening of her body, the seeming of new life and strength that tingled in her at his blessed words. She straightened up and pressed his hand and a great breath fluttered on her lips, a sigh of such relief as only words of life can bring. Thus love served its own in Briston's heart and made him glad at her joy.

But trouble was on Paradise and no mistake. The whole crowd was distressed to the bottom of their adoring souls that their Val, their Pride of

Paradise, had shown the world of Santa Leandra her interest in the Black Rustler! It would be on every tongue in the rangeland—and what complications might not arise from it! Into what sinister inferences of association between Paradise and the Black Rustler's band would it not be construed!

And they were right. Talk was stirring in every nook and corner. Clendenning heard of the affair and studied it from every angle, and finally came clear with his faith untarnished.

"Nobody knows what a girl will feel for a handsome man," he said gamely, "but I'd stake on John Hannon. He shot him, didn't he?"

"Yes," they argued back, "but what'd th' Rustler say? Accused Hannon of killin' his father an' takin' somethin' which he didn't specify. Knew each other, didn't they? Been together sometime, hadn't they?"

But Clendenning shook his head.

"I stake on John," he said.

So the rangeland drowsed. The Indian Summer passed and the first breath of frost came down upon the land, turning its sparse green to brown. The fall round-up loomed on the horizon—and the boss was still away. Briston watched things and persons with anxious eyes—and he did not let José out of range, day or night.

Val was her old self, busy, efficient, save for a new gravity, a strong repression that was with her

always. She went often to Refugio, hoping against hope for word of Velantrie, but Father Hillairé was helpless to give it her. The oblivion of the Border had swallowed him at last, and deep in his wise old heart the priest hoped that it would keep him. Dear as the boy was to him the girl was dearer. Belle was planning her little pretty changes against her husband's coming—a new table for his pipe and books this time, a little new tune, made up entirely from her own fancies and worked out by her clever fingers, a cushion for his particular chair.

And far in the Blind Trail Hills poor Redstar ran his endless circle, called at the twilights, tore at the saplings and ate out his heart, while far across the miles his beloved answered that unheard cry.

One by one the days went by and nothing new stirred in the cattle country. It was hard on driving time and Briston was wishing fervently for the boss. Other outfits would be at the round-up and he must needs send riders here and there to look out for the interests of Paradise, as they would send to him, and he did not like to spare any of his men. Why, he scarcely knew, but it was so. He did not leave the home ranch himself these times when Hannon was away, and there was plenty to see to, indeed.

The boys were overhauling the chuck-wagon, looking to saddles and ropes. The feeling of fall was in the air.

And then came a night, soft and dark with many stars in the early hours and with promise of a great white moon very late.

It was one of the few nights left in the lap of summer from which the warmth was spilling fast, and Val swung in the fringed hammock and talked in a low voice with the men. Briston smoked on his accustomed bench, Siff and Rosy lounged on the hard dry earth, their slim young figures relaxed, while Dirk and Perly shared another hammock nearer to Bluewater.

Out by the bunk-house one of the *vaqueros* strummed an old guitar and sung a Spanish love-song in a voice like a harp. At a window of the darkened kitchens Fanita listened. Inside the adobe house Belle Hannon, to whom all night was day, all day night, played softly her plaintive tunes. Never in her after life could Val bear to hear such music in the dark.

She talked in broken sentences with Briston, looking up at the stars. A thousand things moiled through her mind and she gave them voice, secure in the loving friendship that encompassed her.

"Tom," she said, "I asked dad once what constituted a good man—and he said 'a brave one, quick on the trigger.' What would you say?"

The foreman smoked silently a while. Then he knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"A good man, Val," he said, "is the man who deals squarely by his fellows an' has such honest love of humanity in his heart that he can help th'

helpless, even at risk of his neck—such love for one woman that he can serve her all his life, either rewarded or unrewarded—a man who can sacrifice."

What gentle intent was in the speaker's mind only he knew, and he said no more. But Val had instant food for thought—as perhaps he had intended.

Help the helpless! Ah—it was Velantrie who did that—at risk of his neck, literally—who robbed the rich in that cruel country across the line to give to the poor—who hunted among the *jacals* for the deserter that he might bring him and happiness to poor Maria. . . . A sick longing to see the face that made her think of light behind a curtain came over her and she bit her lip, suddenly tremulous. . . . Belle's sweet music, now—it made her heart ache with a nameless grief, a presentiment of sorrow that is old as human blood. . . . And the golden voice of the *vaquero,* faint in the night. How they made her feel the monstrous might of life, the futility of all human plans, all loves, all priceless things of this earth!

And then, sudden as a shot in the silence, came the voice of Perly from the other hammock.

"Tom," it cried sharply, "look there! An' there!—an' yonder!"

With a spring the boy was on his feet, a slim shape, straight in the dusk.

"Good God!" he cried again, "th' signal-fires! Boys—th' Rustler rides tonight!"

Without another word he flung himself from the

patio and they heard the sound of his running feet as he went toward the corrals. True enough. From down at the south where El Rancho Rio lay on the skyline there rose on the still dark a tall pillar of flame that was already answered from the southwest and the west.

Tom Briston stood tense, reading their messages.

"Raid," the one fire said, "at the flying Y."

He turned and looked west.

"We circle south," three red flares said.

Southeast two signals placed far apart told the rangeland, "We ride north," and beside the tall fire at the south two small ones close together bore Clendenning's faithful promise.

"We'll close in on the Blind Trail pass from the south."

Thus was a net formed, a trap laid, and anything driving within its circle had best ride fast for the pass—for the horses of the plains would soon be out. And they were hard to beat, those horses that had run at Santa Leandra. Dollar, the gallant grey with the dapples on his hip—Silkskin, swift as waters flowing, black and wild—and all of Hannon's Red Brood that stamped in the home corrals—for the ranchers were pledged to this and all must go.

With one accord the cowboys followed Perly, shouting, snatching spur and bridle as they ran—the guitar out at the bunk-house ceased its strumming, stopped by a flattening hand on its strings—the *vaqueros* ran to the horses too.

Only Briston was left for a moment standing in the *patio*. A gasp caught his ear—a deep, short breath that seemed to come from drowning lungs—and Val Hannon stood beside him, swaying on her feet like a drunkard.

"Tom," she gasped, still as if she could not breathe, "Tom—my friend——"

Briston caught her tightly in the bend of his arm and looked into her face that shone white in the dark like a moon in fog.

"Yes, Val darling," he said.

"If——" Again that awful gasping breath.

The girl gripped her hands, steadied her swaying body with the old sweet strength. Then the words came a bit more strongly.

"If—they catch the—Black Rustler this night—don't—don't let—them—the Crag Oak——"

She wet her lips that were stiff and cold—reached out a groping hand and touched the gun that always hung at the foreman's belt.

"Shoot—him, Tom," she said thickly, "straight—ah!"—it was a sighing breath—"in—the—forehead—for me!"

"I will," said Briston and was gone.

CHAPTER XX

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN"

TRAGEDY breathed upon the rangeland. Father Hillairé felt it, pacing in his dry garden and counting his beads. He was thinking of Velantrie's soul.

Belle Hannon felt it and ceased her plaintive playing. She came, sure of foot in the darkness, to the east door that opened into the *patio*.

"Val!" she called.

The girl, clinging to the trunk of the cottonwood tree that stood above Bluewater, while she tried to beat her heart to bravery and hope, essayed three times to answer that call. Always when her mother spoke she must reply, for she was that rare and perfect thing, a true and loving daughter. But her numb lips would not frame a word, her dry throat worked up and down soundlessly. Then she shook herself together by a supreme effort.

"Yes, Belle dear," she said.

"Eh?" said Belle, instantly alarmed, "what's the matter, Val?"

And Val answered, as she must, though the words seemed to tear out of her stifling heart.

"Signal-fires," she said, "that say—the Rustler's —out!"

"Great goodness!" said Belle, "Thank Heaven

—at last! 'And Boyce Clendenning rides, of course. Oh, how I wish John were here! But Boyce will do the trick if it is possible. Let's hope it is."

The girl by the cottonwood looked at her mother with strained and piteous eyes. Then she dragged her body forward and took the reaching hand.

"I think I'll go to bed," said Belle; "good-night, dear."

Val leaned and kissed her, listened dully to her steps returning into the house.

Then she, too, entered and groped her way, more blindly than Belle had ever done, into the far depths of her own south room.

She stumbled among the rugs, traversed its great length as in a dream, and fell upon her knees before the life-size statue of the Virgin Mary that stood in an alcove beyond the ancient bed. Upon the waxen feet on the pedestal above her she laid her no less waxen face and fell to praying as she had never prayed in all her life—for the soul of the Black Rustler.

'And far away in the shadowed levels the Black Rustler himself played his last great game. A mad delight was in his heart, the daring and reckless courage that had marked him on the Border rode high in him—like a wind whipping a prairie fire. It whipped him to strong deeds, to the fine point of the long odds, to the joy of beating the ranchers by the width of a hair. He rode a horse upon whose

gallantry he could depend—though there was one other he had rather had beneath him—and by his side rode his aid and lieutenant, companion of an hundred night-rides, a huge bulk of a man on a powerful, raw-boned horse.

It was not fat steers they took this night, neither anything that a man might need, but something to cut the loser with a lash of chagrin and rage—namely Black Princess, the fine young mare of whom the Flying Y had boasted much for this year's races. Gentle-hearted, tractable, the Princess ran between their running horses, making for the distant pass into the Blind Trail Hills, and the rising note of their speed proved that there was something in her, that the boasts had had foundation.

From time to time the Black Rustler rose in his stirrups and scanned the world around with its spires of flame upon the darkness, and at each sight he whooped with a mad laughter and struck a fist upon his pommel.

"Their little fires!" he cried, "their horses! Their cocksure faith! While th' Black Rustler rides out of their net like an eel!"

But their little fires covered a further readiness than he could know, their faith was solid as a rock—for many men were far along the sides of the net before the fires were set, and some of them had known for three days that the Black Princess was to go tonight! In fact the pass was guarded by five men in the shadow of the cliff, their six-guns wait-

ing—and some one carried a good rope at his saddlebow.

For old Dame Fate was pleased to make a play in the rangeland—and her bells were set to ring on the Rustler's number.

So time passed and Val on her knees, her pale hands gripping the Virgin's robes, her lips like ashes and her dark eyes dull with agony, could not count the hours.

Belle slept in her distant room like a healthy child and all Paradise was silent as the dead, save for the murmur of Bluewater in the *patio* and a night bird calling from the trees. The fires on the skyline died down—and the net drew in its miles-wide circle.

There were more horses afoot in the plains that night than any rider knew. For instance—a spotted pinto pony, like a ghost in the dark—and a great red horse with a shadow on his shoulders. These two met, by chance, where the Little Antelope cut down to its ford beyond Refugio—and there was a peal of vixen laughter, a taunt and a small fist shaken to the stars. The man on the stallion caught his breath, thought swiftly, and swore a low-toned oath.

For a while he sat where the flying pinto left him, in the lee of the cottonwoods, thinking as swiftly as he had ever thought in all his vivid life. Then he drew a hand across his eyes and rode through the shallow waters to Refugio.

And beyond the pass in the Blind Trail Hills

something was happening—something vital, that would have to do with the play that was coming—for that top sapling in the hidden glade, long thinned and bending, gave at last beneath the worrying teeth, bent farther yet to the push of a broad bay breast—and the ends let go from their cut slots in the wall!

With a hoarse scream the Redstar, feeling the barrier give, pushed, felt of the remaining height with his bending neck—and whirled from the gate to tear away up the level floor.

Far in the centre he turned, leaned forward, poised, then stretched away in full flight toward the lowered bars.

It was still a splendid hurdle, enough to tax his full strength and brain, but beyond it lay the sounding cañons, the pass, the open plains—and—the sweet green fields of home! Home—and the calling voice of his beloved—with the sweet scents in her hair—the feel of love in her caressing hands!

Like a wind upon a hill—like a kite above a cloud—like a bird that skims a prairie—the Redstar took the gate! Free! Free as the winds that sucked up the gorge, as the untrammelled waters!

He flung up his great head, his soft eyes shining like fox-fire, and with his mouth open and screaming his joy to all the silent walls, the Redstar went down the cut—for home!

The late white moon was rising. At Refugio Father Hillairé sat in the darkness of his garden

with his head upon his hands. His heart was dark with sorrow as the garden with its shades. What it was that bore so heavily upon him he could not have said. Yet he knew, so sensitive and mysterious is the loving heart, that the time of tragedy had come. He had prayed until his soul was dry of prayer. Now he waited, bowed upon his table, on the mercy of the Lord.

And the Black Rustler, his horse's feet soft-padded, rode for the guarded pass hilariously. But he, too, was keen as the seventh sense. He, too, felt a mystery in the night that he had never felt. Safe enough yet, he stopped his headlong flight, his strong hands on lead-rope and rein, rose in his stirrups and listened.

"By ——!" he said, "there's danger at th' pass!"

"Why?" asked the big man beside him.

"Don't know," he answered briefly.

Without a second's loss he turned and rode toward the south.

"Where?" asked the other man again.

"Between th' Flyin' Y an' El Rancho Rio."

But when a half-hour had passed and they were far down in the open levels, once again the leader stopped and glanced this way and that. He raised his head like a hound at fault and sniffed the cooling air. And just at that moment a gunshot cracked far to the west—another farther away—one round toward the north—

Bark—bark—bark—like the answering of the pack when the leader signals "found." A ring of speaking shots—sign that, with quarry scented, the net was closing down.

The first cold fear struck into the Rustler's heart. He raised his head yet higher and listened in every quarter. Then he laughed again—but it was different laughter. Brief, hollow, full of a mad excitement. He sobered and held out his hand to the man beside him.

"We've had many a ride together," he said, "an' it's ben a great life—th' best in its line—such a life as no other two men on this Border have ever lived. But I think it's done at last. This was to have ben th' best, th' most brilliant—th' high watermark of all. Shake, old man. An'—good-bye. Turn th' damn mare loose—an' ride—if there's any way *to* ride that these damn ranchers"—there was savage hatred in his voice—"ain't covering."

He wrung the hand of the silent man, who could not speak it seemed, and was away.

At Paradise Val prayed, scarce conscious of the words that trailed across her lips. Sometimes it was a mixture of the words of the Salve Regina—"Hail, Holy Queen—Mother of Mercy—our life—our sweetness and our hope! . . . Pray for us, Oh, Holy Mother of God!" and again the Litany of the Blessed Virgin with its adoration, and she did not know that for every "us" she substituted "him."

And at that hour, when the world seemed lightening with the rising moon, while Val prayed in anguish, while the Black Rustler rode away on his last great lap alone—Father Hillairé rose trembling to stand in the gate and grasp Velantrie's hand. "*Padre,*" said the man simply, "I've come back—to the Church door—and to you."

"Red?" asked the priest with ineffable sorrow in his voice.

"No. White, I hope. As white as I can ever be. I am in haste, father—great haste—and I need you. Always I have needed you, it seems—but more than ever now."

He spoke rapidly and Father Hillairé drew him into the moonlight that he might look into his face with yearning eyes.

It was thinned a bit and paler.

"The wound?"

"Better. Almost well. It was nothing—a scratch. I've had many worse. But—he *was* the man, *padre*—you know that."

"How well!" said the other, "and for how long!"

"So? And you did not tell me?"

They were speaking in the elemental, as if it was the time for all hopes, all dissimulations, to be laid aside.

"No. Why should I?"

"True. You were my friend."

Velantrie laid his arm on the shoulders under the

shabby cassock that seemed bowing under an invisible weight.

"Be my friend now, *padre,*" he said, and there was a wistful tone in the rich voice that vibrated like a string, "I am in great haste but I want something."

"Ask," said the priest simply.

"I am no Catholic—I am nothing in that line—but, father—I am about to die I think. If I might ask—if you would——

"Such comfort as you have for lost souls, *padre* —give it me."

Father Hillairé wet his lips.

"Die?" he asked stiffly, "how, my son?"

"The Black Rustler rides tonight—into a trap, set and prepared by that little arch-fiend, Lolo Sanchez—I met her but now by the Little Antelope—who thought it was I who would spring it. For *her* sake—you know—for *her* sweet sake—well—it is I who shall spring the trap, *padre,* if I can beat him in, and no one will be the wiser. You know I have the Rustler's fame about me anyway. . . . Can you give me comfort, father dear?"

The old priest lifted his face and never in his long, hard life had it been so glorified, so furrowed with its tears.

"'Greater love hath no man than this, that he giveth his life for his friend,'" he said tremulously, "come."

And for the first time Velantrie, "sometime of the Border," stepped to the little side door of the

Mission, bowed his bare black head and entered. Father Hillairé lighted a taper on the altar and closed the doors.

Velantrie knelt with his face toward the light.

CHAPTER XXI

HOME TO THE FIELDS OF PARADISE

THE net was drawing in—drawing in. Not a man on that far-flung line knew it so well as the Black Rustler himself who rode with muffled hoofs inside the net, sweeping this way and that, listening, *feeling* for the unseen foe. His brain, always keen and calculating, counted the ranches and the probable men from each, the distance they would be from their various starting places by now. To the northwest he went—but he knew they were there. To the north he tried to go—but he felt them coming there—from Paradise—the riders on the fleet Red Brood. Then he swung in a wide arc toward the Blind Trail Hills, but left them eastward and pushed north again—for there was no ranch between Paradise and the cliffs. It was a far cry, that way, however, and he would likely meet the men from the two outfits that lay farther north yet—for this vast net was perfect.

He had known it would be. What he had not known, was this—that it had been warned and almost wholly set to its pattern hours before the fires were lighted. Now, in some flash of that illuminating seventh sense that had saved his skin so many times before, he knew that the die was cast—that he had played his last great game and failed.

So he laid the rein on his horse's neck—that same and splendid runner on whom he had always said he would "stake a lot," and rode for the one thing dearer to him than life or anything on this earth—the untarnished love of his wife.

•

Rode from east to west *inside* the net, directly across the path of the riders from the north.

The cottonwoods in the *patio* cast long black shadows on the ranch-house wall. Paradise was still as death.

Belle in her deep chamber did not hear the sound of muffled feet that struck the flags by the spring—nor Val, half lost to all consciousness before the Virgin Mary. They were, alas! slow feet and stumbling, for poor Lightning had run as he had never run before—had covered killing miles at a killing pace, had shown that "something by-ordinary" in him of which his master had sometimes spoken. Now he stumbled in beside the spring and stopped with his head hanging and the breath whistling in his sides.

The man in his saddle flung off his back and entered with a soundless step the darkened house. On the sill he stopped and cast one proud high look at the *patio,* sharp in its light and shadow, at the sweeping fields below, at the corrals and all the buildings lying so peacefully in the silent night.

"Th' best in its line," he muttered under his breath, "th' best in its line—always."

A moment later Belle Hannon stirred in her sleep and said softly, "John."

The man who stood beside the bed reached down and touched her gently.

"Belle—sweetheart," he said, "I'm here."

Instantly she was awake, was up and clinging to him, her arms about his neck, her lips against his face. Little fluttering laughter was in her broken words, she quivered with the sudden ecstasy of his living presence.

"Home again!" she cried softly, "Oh, John! My man!"

John Hannon sat down on the bed's edge and drew her close upon his heart, smoothing the soft hair from her temples. He reached and drew a curtain, letting in a flood of the moonlight that he might the better see her face.

"Belle darling," he said, "do you love me?"

The woman laughed.

"Love you? I think I adore you, John—the best husband, the noblest man I ever knew. Yes," she added soberly, "may God forgive me, I think it's more than love."

"Have I made you happy, little woman? Always?"

"Always, my beloved. But why this serious talk?—and just at your return when we are always so foolishly happy?"

"I have a desire to know," he said.

"Then know—that never a man in this world but you could have made heaven on earth for a blind

woman—would have been the heart and soul of honour in all his dealings with her. Would have been so patient, so tender, so kind and withal so true. Oh, John, you are—next to God to me."

John Hannon loosed one arm from about her, drawing her nearer with the other, and his fingers slipped softly to the gun hanging at his hip.

"Now let me confess," he said lightly, "come in with th' responses in this here litany we're sayin'. You have ben, an' are, th' only star in my sky, th' light of my universe. I love you better than anything I possess—lands, money, horses or our one child. Better than all. Are you happy?"

"Happy!" murmured Belle. "Ah! Happy!"

The man bent his head above her, put his lips to hers in one long kiss. The hand came up from the holster, the blue gun with it. Both were steady as a rock. The wondrous courage that had marked the Black Rustler on the Border met its greatest test and did not flinch.

Slowly, carefully, the muzzle rose, picking its way more surely than ever before. There must be no bungle here, no slightest slip. Inch by inch it crept up along Belle Hannon's throat, her fair cheek—reached her white temple and halted, just opposite the spot where the soft curls lay. The dark eyes of the man burned on her face in one long yearning look.

And then Val Hannon, dull in her trance of anguish, heard a shot that boomed in the silent house most monstrously—another that followed on

its heels. She drew her body from the steps of the pedestal, rose slowly to her feet. She passed a hand across her eyes, shook herself as if to clear the shadows from her brain.

Shots!

Something—something had happened!

Then she seemed to come out of her own abandonment of suffering with a jerk, to gather her own keen wits. Almost instantly she was John Hannon's daughter, strong, alert, ready, though she trembled with foreboding as she passed through the shadowed house toward her mother's room. In the living-room she met Fanita, half-clad and frightened, coming from the servants' quarters.

"What is it, señorita?" whispered the girl.

"Shots," said Val, thickly, "oh—shots!"

At the threshold of that closed room she stopped, sick to her soul with fear. Then she raised a resolute hand and struck the panels.

"Belle!" she called clearly, "Belle dear!"

There was no sound and again she called. Still that awful silence. Val Hannon, as her father would have done, opened the door and entered.

In the bright square of moonlight from the window John Hannon lay with his wife upon his breast, still with majestic peace—and his gun lay smoking in his loosened hand, while on his face there stood out, stark in the moon-glow, a broad black velvet mask!

Val stood in the doorway looking down and the heart in her breast was stopped. When it laboured

on again she relaxed her hold on the lintel and slid weakly down along the wall. The room and its ghastly wreck was whirling.

She saw her mother's smiling face—the temple beneath the curls. She saw her father's uncovered iron-grey head, which there was no mistaking. She saw the revolver and the mask.

And then Val Hannon knew. The Black Rustler! Ah! The Boss of Paradise! The net—and the signals!

How long she sat crouched by the doorway she did not know. She heard Fanita crying and the feet of the women running, knew that dark terror-stricken faces filled the door behind her. And she knew that those two in the square of moonlight were dead—gone together into that vast unknown which waits the human soul.

Gone—her dad whose pride and power in the rangeland were unbounded—her mother with her high spirit and her splendid faith. Gone—the love, and the pride, and the power! Gone in darkness and dishonour, in sin and arrogance! But—gone together, these two who had loved so grandly, and who must still love!

The Black Rustler! Before her burning eyes there came a train of incidents and events, like those changing figures in a kaleidoscope. The talk with Velantrie on the rim of Mesa Grande—the description of the horses that tallied so sharply—the story of the masked riders and the camp in Mexico—four years ago!

Four years ago John Hannon brought the Red-star home! The day at Hunnewell's—the shots—and the words "kill me as you killed my father, you damned murderer! Take The Comet as you took——" Then her hand on John Hannon's shoulder, her face where his had been, the awful look on Velantrie's face, and the muttered words "I—was mistaken—this is—not—my man."

Oh! Holy Mother! What a monstrous web was this! And death to crown it all—the only way! The only way! Yes—since Boyce Clendenning—her father's friend, the man her mother trusted to catch the Black Rustler—was at the head of that deadly net!

She heard the voices of the women talking in high hysteria—a horse's hoofs sharp on the stones outside—and Fanita speaking in her ear.

"Oh, señorita," it was begging, "come quick to the *patio!* There is one who rides with news and who will not be denied! Come, Señorita Val!"

Dully the girl drew herself up along the door-post, closed the door upon the room. News? What mattered news? But from force of habit she, who had always answered all comers to Paradise in the master's absence, went stupidly out with Fanita's arms about her to guide her steps.

In the white light there stood a stranger. Or, hold—not quite a stranger. It was that slim boy whom Velantrie had brought, a long day back, to Father Hillairé at Refugio—Mesos Pecuento.

He stood holding a dripping horse and his breath came fast.

"Señorita," he said, speaking swiftly in Spanish, "I come because Maria wept and would not cease. She says that one you love rides into a trap of death, set to catch another. That Father Hillairé gave him comfort for the end in the Mission—was giving it when I left—for Maria, watching, did not wait for the finish. She sends you word that this—one—covers his face with a bit of black from the *padre's* torn cassock—and rides a horse—a great red horse—like one you know—into the trap by the Blind Trail Pass—to save your heart from hurt. But Maria says that you—know love—and that the horses of Paradise are fleet. That only you can save him—from the Crag Oak—because the Black Rustler is——"

"Stop!" cried Val, white-lipped, "I know!"

She stood swaying uncertainly, while the full import of the tumbling speech sank into her mind and heart.

One—Velantrie—rode—to the trap by the Blind Trail Pass—knowing— He rode a great red horse—such as that dim tradition of the Border ascribed to the Black Rustler—its damning double. He covered his face with a bit of the *padre's* cassock—Ah, what friends! What lovers, these two—the bandit and the priest!

That relentless net, drawing in, would catch him—and the rest was sure.

Those two in the moon-lighted room—they might

sleep at Paradise forever, secure in their honour and their fame! Her name and her father's would be forever clear—at the price of one bandit's life, one old priest's silence!

What a web! What a web!

But she was her mother's daughter and never for one moment did she think of these things, save to make clearer the great light that was breaking. She shook her whole young body and tightened her nerves to action.

"Fanita," she cried, "my riding skirt! Quick!"

To another woman she flung a word, "A horse—Lightning——"

But Lightning stood a little way apart, done and drooping. Every ounce there was in him he had given his master in that last great ride.

"Then Red——" But Redcloud, too, was beyond her reach. There was nothing left in the corrals of all the matchless racers, nothing to serve her in her need.

Then did Val Hannon lose for a moment her faith and her sanity and all the good courage that had stood by her in these awful days.

"Gone!" she screamed, "all gone! He rides the best horse in the rangeland—and I have none! Death will catch him first!"

She flung her arms to the lighted skies and her face had lost its beauty. It was pinched and drawn, the lips curled from the teeth.

"Oh, Redstar! Redstar! If I just had you!"

And half unconscious of what she did, her very reason whirling, she cupped her hands and sent pealing out upon the silence the piercing whistle of the two notes, one rising, one falling, that had been wont to bring the racer to her in the old days. Far and bye it carried in the stillness, far out along the levels, like a clarion call for help.

And hark! What was that, faint and fine in the distance, that answered like its echo? The ringing call of a horse—a running horse—that shook with speed and rhythm! The shrill high challenge of—nay, it could not be the king! Yet the girl's heart stopped to listen.

Again she called—and again it came—that keen, high neighing!

"Lord God in Heaven!" said Val Hannon.

She held her breath. Along the plain there came a sound—a sound for which, all these weary months, she had waited with a faith that could not die—the long-roll of the great king's feet, like which there was none other!

For Redstar, the king, came back to Paradise! Came in strength and joy, like winds and waters flowing, leaving behind him the walled-in glade, the slipping miles, and five astonished watchers at the pass who had seen a riderless horse shoot by them like a rocket!

The girl at the *patio's* edge leaned forward, straining her eyes to the lighted levels. Up along the open way he came, a marvellous sight! Level as a bolt, running like the wind, his sounding feet a

blur beneath him, the great cloud of his mane flowing back upon his shoulders, his long tail streaming—Oh, the king—the king!—came home to Paradise!

He skirted the fenced-in fields where he had grazed in peace, and came straight to the *patio* with its sentinel cottonwoods. His great hoofs pounded on the ringing stones, he stopped with a slide and plunge, and his soft eyes shone like fox-fire, his nostrils shook with the eager whinnyings that came deep from his chest and would not cease.

Val Hannon flung herself upon him, clung to his high-arched neck, panting with the emotions of the hour which were almost too deep to bear.

And Redstar stretched his eager nose and smelled her over from head to foot, sniffed at her hair, nibbled her arm, her shoulder and her fluttering hands. He was home again after weary exile—and this was his beloved! His beloved by sight and the truer proof of scent, and he was beside himself with joy. The whinnying continued in his throat, he stepped and pushed and nudged the girl who clung against his breast. . . .

And then Fanita came running with a riding skirt—old Juana was dragging the saddle from Lightning's back.

"Quick!" panted Val, "a bridle, too!"

It had been long, long since the Redstar had borne either, but he steadied at the familiar process, stopped his excited whinnying.

And once again the Prides of Paradise flung out from its shadowed *patio*. Once again Val felt the mighty shoulders beneath her knees, the great mane blowing in her face! It had come true, that dim, instinctive prophecy that had bidden her wait with patience.

It had come true—and in the hour of her greatest need—the time of her dire distress. The king was under her at last! Redstar, the mighty!

With the first tears welling to her aching eyes she leaned down and reached her caressing hands along his neck.

"Sweetheart," she sobbed, "Oh, Sweetheart! You've got the thing I need—that I have never asked you for—the vastest speed in the rangeland! I ask you for it now! Run—Redstar!—run! For a man's life!"

And she shook the rein above him, loosened her whole young body in the saddle, slouched forward along his neck—and began the greatest ride that she would ever know.

Redstar was lean and hard—as attest that deep-worn path at the wall's foot in the hidden glade. He had been long in that solitude. He had been lonely and unhappy. His gentle heart had ached with the loneliness, the cramping cliffs and the silence. Now the great spread of the open plains lay out before him, he felt the familiar creak and wear of leather, the weight of a rider—and that rider called in his ear for speed!

Speed! Ah, yes—the great king had it! He had

always had it—ever since those dim days when he had run on a smooth circle with many horses beside —behind—him—and with cheering crowds at the rail's edge that flowed past as he ran. He had it—but he had not been called upon to give it lately—not since those long mysterious rides down to the Border with the master in the saddle. Not since those great days when he had been wont to wait in some thicket—at some town's border—for the rush—the leap—and the getaway—when he lay down to earth and left behind the rancher despoiled —the posse—and the sheriff!

He had it—and he gave it now, in joy and gladness. Val Hannon felt it spring to life in every working muscle, in the rising hum of the drumming feet, in the sting of the keening wind that was beginning to flail her cheeks. For the Redstar lay down to earth once more—and ran—for a man's life.

The girl looked round the stretching plains. Far to the north she could see streaming dots that were the men from the two northernmost ranches. Out to the south she heard a shot or two—others that answered—and knew that the huge ring was drawing in.

But where in its circle was Velantrie? Had he left Refugio yet? Others must be nearer the pass than she. Could she cover the greater distance? Only Redstar could answer that—and her heart leaped as she listened to that note of his speed constantly rising.

Far off to her left she saw dim shapes—and they were riding in the same direction—all—all were going toward that ambushed pass!

And up from Refugio, in the southern centre of the mighty amphitheatre, Velantrie must be riding on The Comet! At last, after all these years, The Comet and The Meteor were thundering down the land toward a common goal! Was there anything in all the rangeland that could come near them in their pride and their endurance and their wondrous speed? Nothing—save and except that ungainly raw-boned horse moiling this way and that in the narrowing net, giving its best to no avail but averting the hand of destiny as long as possible. Tragedy rode at the raw-bone's tail and comedy as well, for the Black Princess, swift and excited, clung to her thief's side and would not be beaten back!

The net drew in. It had been a wide net, indeed, and though good horses made it up, yet it had taken toll of them. The silver Dollar under that grim and quiet rider, Boyce Clendenning, was dark with pouring sweat. Three miles north the beautiful Silkskin ran with open mouth—but ran still strongly—while a claybank and a pinto pony at widely divergent points kept inside the lessening circle.

And in the centre, leaving all comers on the fringes, Val Hannon on Redstar swept toward the pass—Velantrie on The Comet closed in to parallel her, all unconsciously. This was to be the last ride, the last great fling of Velantrie of the Border—of

Don Quixote Velantrie, the sometime reckless robber of the rich, the champion of the poor.

As he rode he thought of many things—and these thoughts were sweet with comfort. He had broken that oath, made on his father's body, and he was traitor to his given word. But love had made him traitor—and who in this world so good a lover as that grand old man had been?

When they met, as Velantrie devoutly hoped they would, it would be clean hands they struck together, and he could carry a richer gift to show than that black revenge he had sought so long—the holy gift of sacrifice.

Sacrifice! The best word in the language—all save love, *she* had said, because of love was sacrifice born. Ah, yes. Of love was sacrifice born. Sacrifice to the last great end—a man's life.

She had loved him—but she loved that other, too. Perhaps as he had loved the fine Kentucky gentleman. . . . Well—he trusted The Comet to make that eastern pass first. Then—if John Hannon rode in that circle, as he undoubtedly must, he, Velantrie would prove the worth of those two words—for Hannon would, for his life's sake, tear off what disguise he might have worn—while he—would wear still that little piece of the shabby cassock, torn from Father Hillaire's bending knee!

At the pass three more men had joined the ambuscade—men from the Flying Y.

The net closed in along the cliffs—from north—

from south. To the two riders sweeping eastward in the centre, the wall of the cliffs rose dark against the moon. Soon the long black arm of that ghastly gallows tree, that Crag Oak, would stand grotesquely against the moon! The girl's heart ached in her breast and she touched the stallion's neck. It was scarcely damp.

She became conscious of a rider on her right, going straight toward the pass. She strained her eyes and her ears. From behind she could hear the long-roll of running horses—drawing in—drawing in!

Was it Velantrie? The horse beneath him seemed vaguely familiar, though it was so far away. There was something familiar in the way it stretched along the plain, in the mighty streaming of its tail upon the wind. Where had she seen this sight before? From the top of Mesa Grande that long past day when the unknown horseman at his band's head had risen in his stirrups to wave his hat to her!

That had been the beginning! He had been her man from that first moment, down through the tense and tragic ones that had seemed to attend their meetings always—down to this awful one when he who should hate her and all hers, rode to his death for their sake!

Nearer she leaned to the Redstar's neck—called in his ear with a panting cry—and the note of his running rose again! But that other—it, too, seemed gaining in speed! What had Velantrie said

once? Within two seconds of the world's record! The two fastest horses in the southwest went neck and neck across the plain in a monstrous race with Death—and there was no audience to see!

The saw-tooth top of the cliff was stark against the sky. The black gut of the pass loomed out, a narrow streak in the face of the wall.

Nearer! Nearer!

She could see the great horse at her right drawing in toward her, narrowing the distance between! Oh, why did not its rider look at her! Could he not see that it was a woman who rode The Comet's rival?

But Velantrie did not turn. He was thinking his last sweet thoughts—bidding her farewell in the last few moments that he could call his own—for there were riders showing now on every hand.

"Redstar!" screamed Val above the sounding hoofs, "oh, sweetheart—beat him in!"

With one last great burst of speed the King of Paradise shot magnificently forward, thrust his reaching nose ahead of that other and thundered up, to slide and plough the earth into flying furrows, to stop at the rifles' mouth with his rider's arms upraised, as if to guard the masked man who slid to a stop behind.

A dozen hands were on her rein, and his—hard-eyed and desperate faces circled them on every side—and a mass of horsemen were thundering up from all points.

"Th' Black Rustler!" they cried as they surged

about. "We've got him, boys! An' his lieutenant —with th' goods! Here's Black Princess doggin' th' thief!"

Hustled forward from behind a raw-boned horse, panting and wet, bore into the front a huge figure of a man, swearing in fury and tearing at the forgotten mask upon his face.

"Two!" the voices cried, "th' two-man trick again!"

But Val Hannon rose in her stirrups and flung up a tragic arm.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

They paid slight heed to her at first, for eager hands were on Velantrie's rein.

"Th' horse!" they cried, "The wonderful horse! Th' Black Rustler's horse! Ain't no mistakin' him! It's too well known!"

But Val raised her own voice to a commanding cry.

"Look!" she cried. *"At mine!"*

The tone caught the crowd and a second's silence fell.

"Look at these two horses! Look hard, men!"

The crowd dropped apart a bit the better to obey.

In astounded silence they stared hard at the two red stallions. Colour for colour—size for size—proud head for proud head—they were the same! Bewilderment sat upon the faces of the ranchers.

"What's this?" said Boyce Clendenning at last, "Miss Hannon—what is this?"

Val turned desperately to him.

"It is that—" she caught her breath pitifully and then went swiftly on, "that *I* ride—the Black Rustler's famous horse—Redstar of Paradise! And that"—once more she caught her breath in that piteous gasp—she who had been so proud of all that the name of Hannon stood for—"and that—the Black Rustler himself—my father, gentlemen—John Hannon, lies at home in his wife's bedroom—with—with—" she choked and stopped.

Not a man in that panting circle but caught his breath and held it in waiting horror.

"—With a bullet in his head and—with Belle Hannon—dead upon his breast!"

A sharp sigh cut into the tragic silence. It came from the lips of Velantrie, sitting like stone in his saddle.

"Too late!" he breathed. "*Too late!*"

There was a stir among the men.

"Good God!" said Boyce Clendenning, helplessly, "are you mad, Val?"

"No," said she, "but desperately in earnest. Ride with me to Paradise—and prove it. This man," she turned to Velantrie and held out a steady hand, the unshaking hand of a woman strong, courageous to the foundations of her heart.

"This man was my father's enemy. He came to the rangeland to find—and—kill him—for—for an old score," once more she halted in the abasing of her pride, but that deep truth and courage whipped her on, "a *blood* score, gentlemen——"

"Ah!—Hunnewell's—" some one gasped.

"Yes—Hunnewell's," said Val, "but John Hannon beat him to it—he was—was the best shot, you know——"

The best shot! Yes—the Rustler was known all up and down the Border for that!

"And then—then—this man—Velantrie—met me—in the *padre's* garden—and we came to love each other."

She told it simply, in the bare stress of the moment.

"So when he found that my father—his enemy—was to ride into the trap—he took a piece of the *padre's* cassock for a mask—and——"

But her voice trailed off to silence. She was drained dry of effort, of anything.

Gently Velantrie closed his fingers on that reaching hand and came abreast of her. He pulled off the black trifle that had covered his eyes and faced the throng.

"Gentlemen," he said," may I take Miss Hannon back to the *padre* at the Mission? There are women there, and her good friend, the priest. You may send an escort——"

"No," said Boyce Clendenning with an effort, "Val Hannon's word is plenty. Take her now. We'll go to Paradise, Val," he finished with a heavy pain at his loyal heart, "don't come until tomorrow."

What Clendenning felt at that moment only his own heart would ever know—he who had succeeded in ridding the cattle country of its enemies.

He had succeeded better than he had planned! He could see the face of his friend, John Hannon—sharp and sparkling, helping him in those very plans—the face of that sweet blind woman—! He groaned aloud, unnoticed in the surging crowd that was breaking from its spell.

With the moon above them and the black arm of the Crag Oak reaching grotesquely for its promised burden, Velantrie and Val Hannon turned and rode away across the rangeland, with silence on their lips, but with hands clasped in a love that held the monstrous hour steady, set a light in the future to guide their sorrow-shaken souls.

And an hour later there was nothing at the pass —save the Crag Oak groaning with the burden that swayed upon the breeze, a huge and heavy burden, its bearded blond face leering in the light, for Brideman had paid the penalty for a long life of sin, and for trusting in a woman of Lolo Sanchez' kind.

Lolo—who had sold herself to him—and had sold him to the ranchers, thinking she was selling them a better man as well! Lolo—who sat on her pinto pony deep in the shadow of the cliff beyond the crowd and watched the working of her magic with bitter, frowning eyes.

Fall was sweet upon the rangeland. Cool winds blew over it, high blue skies were cupped above it, and the sweeping levels were no longer green.

At Refugio where the walled-in garden was mellow with late light, Father Hillairé stood in the ever-open gate and watched two figures going away into the northwest where the sunset was painting all the brown reaches with a million brilliant shades.

They were a man and a woman and they rode two splendid horses, red as the sunset, proud creatures that stepped with the same wide grace, their regal heads high on their arching necks, their long tails flowing—The Comet and The Meteor, though he would never be anything but Redstar the King to the girl who loved him, pacing home to Paradise together.

The figures in the saddles, riding slowly with hands clasped and swinging between them, with their faces turned to each other in that mystic wonder of perfect love, were Don and Val Velantrie, fresh from the *padre's* ministrations at the altar of the Church. On Father Hillairé a great peace had settled down, a splendid joy shone in his tender face and he raised his hand and made the sign of blessing above them, though they were so far away.

A month had passed since that one great night. The winter would soon be closing down—with its loneliness and its memories.

This had had great weight, this thought of the girl in the tragedy-haunted house, in bringing Velantrie to the present moment.

"I can't, Val," he had said at first bitterly, "how can I come to Paradise?"

"How can you not?" she had asked simply, "I need you. All Paradise will need you—and Paradise owes you much," she had finished with a tremor of her lips.

So he had laid aside what thought he might have had of a new world, a different beginning. This was her home and her country. Here were her memories—and her graves. Therefore, if she wanted him—here—why—what was there under the shining canopy that she could have asked of him in vain?

So now, at the end of a gorgeous day they rode together into the autumn sunset, up along the wide levels—looked at Mesa Grande towering toward the west—and came at last to the *patio* where the dusky women stood behind the riders to give them greeting.

All were there—Fanita, old Juana, Miguel and Arlas and Felicita—all save that slim youth, José. A month ago, on the heels of the great night, Tom Briston had dropped a heavy hand suddenly on José's shoulder and whirled him to face his accusing eyes.

"Now where," he had said hardly, "did you have th' Redstar hid?" And the *vaquero,* startled out of his usual calm, had answered helplessly, "In the Blind Trail Hills, señor—at the Señor Boss's orders."

"Like I thought. Well—Paradise won't need

you any more," the foreman had told him pointedly, and José had gone with the dawn.

Perly, Siff, Rosy and Dirk stood now and watched with somewhat hostile eyes their Val come home to them belonging with all loving heart to the quiet man who rode beside her.

It was Briston, the foreman, who stood forth to greet them first with a warm, close clasp, almost as friendly for the one as for the other.

Always he was the perfect friend—and if he knew what he had meant that day beyond the simple words, " th' good man is th' one who can deal squarely by his fellows . . . who can love one woman either rewarded or unrewarded . . . who can sacrifice," he gave no sign as he held Velantrie's hand.

But Val, smiling down upon him in her quiet joy, knew that he would be Velantrie's strongest staff in a somewhat trying place and loved him better for it. Then she swung off Redstar and saw him trot away beside his double.

To Velantrie she turned those long dark eyes, shining with the light that would burn for him alone so long as life lasted.

" You have come back, Don," she whispered, " as I said you would—always—to the Church door and to me!"

" To stay," answered Velantrie, " sometime of the Border," as he bent and kissed her softly.

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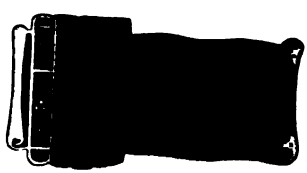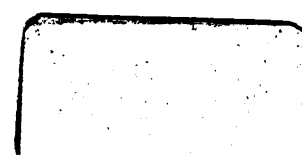
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